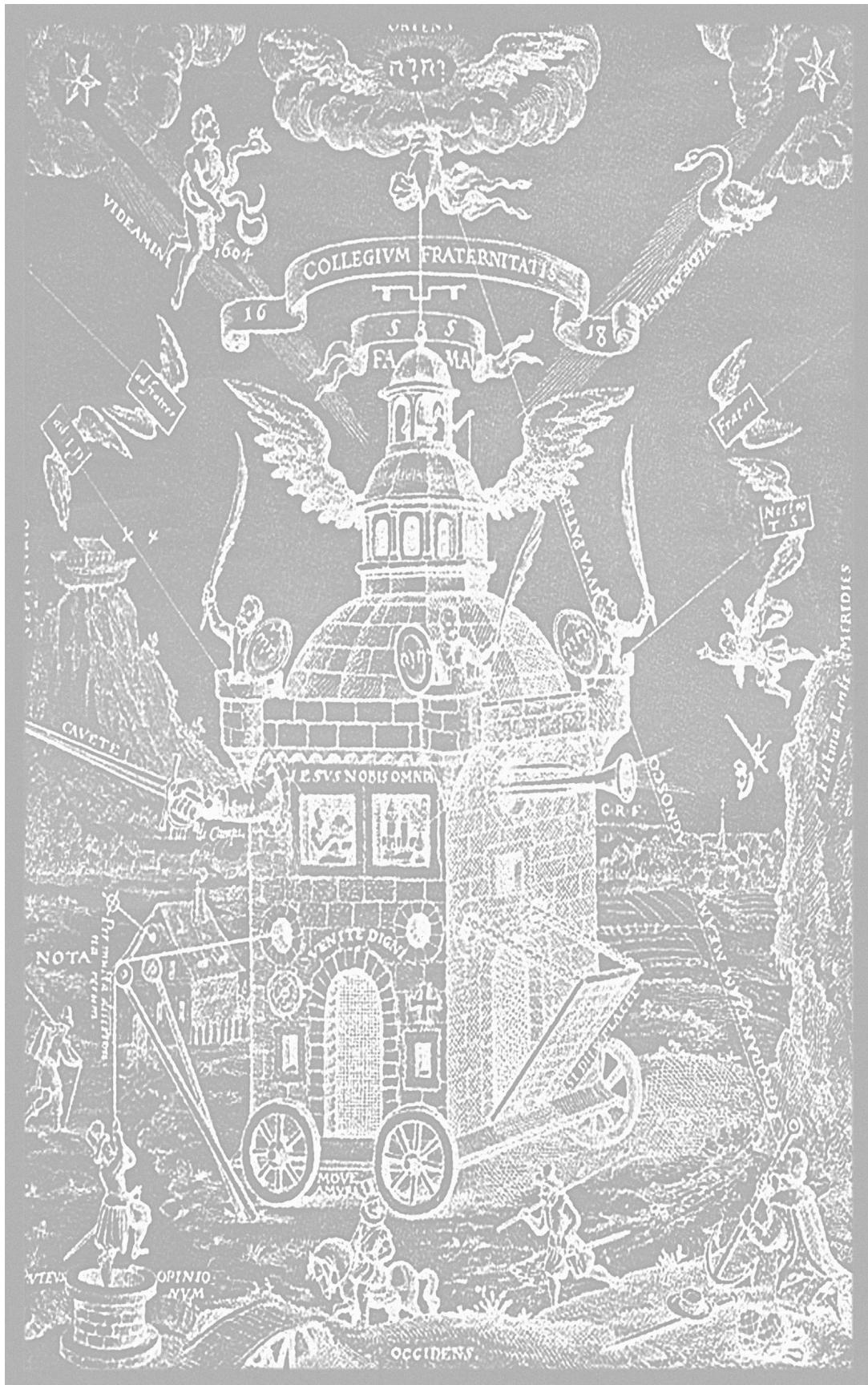


CRASH GORDON

AND THE REVELATIONS FROM BIG SUR



DEREK SWANNSON



ALSO BY DEREK SWANNSON

Crash Gordon and the Mysteries of Kingsburg

Crash Gordon and the Illuminati Underground

The Snowden Avalanche



CRASH GORDON

and the Revelations from Big Sur

DEREK  SWANNSON

CRASH GORDON AND THE REVELATIONS FROM BIG SUR

CRASH GORDON and the Revelations from Big Sur is a work of fiction. When the names of 'real' places, corporations, institutions, secret societies, and public figures are projected onto Crash Gordon's fictional landscape, they are used fictitiously. All other names, characters, locales, and events are products of the author's imagination or, at best, scribbled missives from the collective unconscious. Any apparent similarity to actual persons, living or dead or otherwise occupied (including any and all transhuman, interdimensional entities), is not intended by the author and is purely a matter of the intricate workings of chance and synchronicity, or – as some might call it – fate. (Besides...what harm can come from a little fiction, when the facts are so much more appalling?)

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For My Three Graces

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

Nitt-Witt Ridge

Crash Gordon and the Mysteries of Kingsburg

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This is what I believe:

That I am I.

That my soul is a dark forest.

That my known self will never be more than a little clearing in the forest.

That gods, strange gods, come forth from the forest into the clearing of my known self, and then go back.

That I must have the courage to let them come and go.

That I will never let mankind put anything over me, but that I will try always to recognize and submit to the gods in me and the gods in other men and women.

There is my creed.

- D.H. Lawrence

Reality is not only stranger than we suppose, it may be stranger than we can suppose.

- Terence McKenna, paraphrasing J.B.S. Haldane

If the eye could see the demons that people the universe, existence would be impossible.

- Talmud, Berakhot, 6



PROLOGUE

Crash Post-Crash

A MAN IS AN ANGEL THAT HAS BECOME DERANGED....

—PHILIP K. DICK



STALIN SAYS

*Late Afternoon, November 22, 1987
Moscow*

It wasn't much of a walk from the Bolshoi Theatre to the lobby of the Hotel Metropol, where Rina was staying, but Moscow's snowy, slushy weather was raw enough to make her nipples stand up along the way, even under two layers of cashmere and a lacy pink-and-black-striped Frederick's of Hollywood bra.

She was in a trance, drifting along on her own internal blizzard of shivery good feelings. Her movie had just wrapped - *Stalin Says* - the movie that Axel, her new boyfriend and the movie's director, had promised would make her a star. Today all she'd had to do was sit in the audience, surrounded by all the pretty gold lights and red velvet, and pretend to watch the Bolshoi Ballet put on a show for a bunch of old Russian extras dressed up in tuxedos and ball gowns. Well, that's not *all* she'd had to do.... While the Panavision camera hovered on a crane above her neck like some giant praying mantis, she'd had to bend over and give her leading man, Dolph, a fake blowjob. Meanwhile, from the row behind them, a famous Academy Award-winning actor (and exiled sexual predator) leaned forward looking like a horndog Teddy Roosevelt and whispered in a fake-Russian accent: "Is like second coming of Peter the Great!"

Okay, so it was kind of embarrassing, now that she thought about it... but she'd been through worse. After all, she'd just spent the last two years flying coach between L.A. and Czechoslovakia to make a string of "Czechsploitation" films with her previous boyfriend, the notorious Albanian pervert, Udo Salmanski. Udo's films were a big hit with the drugs-and-prostitution crowd in places like Bosnia and Romania, but they never got shown in American movie theaters. Probably because of his titles, which were gross: *Caligula's Sperm Cake*, *The Flayed Perineum*, and *Cleveland Steamer: Confessions of a Coprophiliac*. No wonder none of her friends back home believed she was an actress.

After her fake blowjob scene, a stunt cock had been brought in for some close-ups - even though Dolph swore he didn't need one. A professional fluffer also showed up, wearing a platinum wig with straight bangs that looked almost exactly like Rina's own platinum Louise Brooks flapper hairdo (which people said was her trademark). The fluffer went right to work, showing off some wicked deep throat skills. She seemed to be able to unhinge her lower jaw like a boa constrictor. The stunt cock popped up, all lobster red and shiny with spit, while Rina just sat there, trying not to stare, with her left hand on the guy's hairy nut sack for continuity. Then she had to kind of jerk him off, close to her lips. She complained, half-joking: "Nobody said I'd be getting fucked in the face when I signed my contract!"

Axel said he was sorry about making her do that, but they needed it for the Unrated European Director's Cut. "Besides," he said cheerily, "everyone in the film business

gets fucked in the face, sooner or later. It's a Hollywood tradition."

To tell the truth, it didn't bother her all that much (not much did, ever since she got crapped on by a witch-faced Ukrainian grandmother for *Cleveland Steamer...*). It was over almost before she knew it. The Second A.D. said he had what he needed as he handed Rina a fistful of cocktail napkins dampened with Stoli. Then Axel climbed up on the stage with his bullhorn and announced that the shooting schedule was a done deal. He thanked everyone for all their hard work and said the wrap party would be happening later that night at the Godunov restaurant, right across from the theatre, where all the hip Soviets go to eat. Like there *were* any hip Soviets, really. He probably just said that so the unpaid Russian extras could feel good about themselves.

Then there was a big round of applause for "our friends from Lubyanka Square" – the KGB – after Axel praised them for handling all the security issues during the filming so the crew could shoot in Moscow without getting hassled. Generally, the KGB guys had been a bunch of stiffes, hanging around at the edges of the sets, spying on everyone while wearing their weird hats with the fuzzy brown earflaps. Still, it was pretty cool. No American film crew had ever had the full cooperation of the KGB before, at least not that anyone knew of. Rina had no idea how Axel had pulled that off. There were rumors floating around that Axel's father was tied in with the Russian mob, or some really rich Soviet businessmen. (*But weren't they all supposed to be Communists who shared everything equally, so there was never enough bread and toilet paper to go around?*) Somewhere, somebody knew some important Russian guys

- that's all she knew for sure. Axel didn't want to talk to her about it, not even in bed at the Metropol after she'd screwed his brains out.

Which was where she was headed now: back to bed at the Hotel Metropol. She wanted to take a little nap so she'd be fresh and perky for the wrap party later. Axel was already off getting drunk somewhere with his film crew buddies. He'd asked her to come along, but she'd told him she'd catch up to him later, after her nap. That way, she explained, she'd be able to stay up late without doing coke. Axel didn't like it when she did coke. He said it made her mean. "Cocaine turns my sexy little butterfly into a frigid, castrating harpy," was how he'd described it to her once. She had to admit that she tended to call people on their shit when she was coked up. But that was nothing compared to what she was like when she was off her meds....

"*Vy nemka?*" a uniformed doorman asked Rina as she started up the steps to the Metropol's lobby.

"I'm sorry... I don't speak Russian," she said over her shoulder.

"I said, 'Are you German?'"

"Oh. God, no! I'm from California."

Finally, she was out of the cold. Rina drew the rapt attention of several bellhops as she crossed the shiny marble lobby under the flattering light of its enormous cut-crystal chandelier. She was beautiful in a sexy way (*as opposed to a frigid harpy way...*) and the unending parade of leering men would never let her forget that fact. At some point during her adolescence, Rina had learned how her stupefying sexual magnetism could be used to her advantage. She had a kind of natural genius for leading

guys along and making them think they had a shot with her. She was always super-friendly and flirty, but never in a slutty way. She was only slutty later, in private, with guys who could help her career. Which was fine – it was *great*, actually – and it wasn't like she was prostituting herself, because there was a hidden side to her (a side she sometimes referred to as Vera) that really liked to screw.

Just for practice, she got into one of the Metropol's creaky old elevators with a man she'd never met before – an old guy (at least forty) wearing an expensive gray chalk-striped suit. He was carrying a cane with a black handle in the shape of a poodle's head. Maybe he was a lawyer, or one of those investment banker types. Whatever. It didn't matter. She could seduce anyone.

When the elevator started up with a little jerk as the electric motor kicked in, Rina pretended to stumble and accidentally-on-purpose grabbed the guy's arm to steady herself. Then she laughed and flashed him a great big smile, holding onto him a few seconds too long. "God, I'm such a klutz!" she said.

"Is okay," the guy said back. English was obviously not his native language.

"Thanks. You're so strong," Rina said, giving his bicep a squeeze before she let him go. "Handsome, too."

"And you are... how you say...? A be-yoo-ti-ful lady."

Rina laughed again and looked away, pretending to be embarrassed. Then she impulsively kissed his cheek. "You're sweet," she said. "Could you push 11 for me?"

The guy pushed the elevator button and Rina could tell, by his furrowed brow, that he was desperately trying to come up with something clever to say to her, but the

language barrier was proving too much for him. So she helped him along:

"I'm going up to my room to take a nap," she said with a yawn that inflated her rib cage, drawing attention to the supple curves beneath her cashmere sweater. She could slather on the sex vibe pretty thick whenever the situation seemed to call for it. A quick glance at the guy's wool slacks confirmed that his crotch was experiencing a surge of manpower, but he was still tongue-tied.

The elevator doors opened on the sixth floor. "Is this your floor?" Rina asked him brightly. The guy hesitated before saying, "Yes, my room here." He made no move to get out. But then, just as the elevator doors were closing, he lunged and sent his arm into the gap. The doors opened again and he turned to Rina with imploring eyes. It seemed like he was dying to ask her to come with him, but he just couldn't find the words.

"Wool is so itchy, right?" Rina said as the guy backed out of the elevator in defeat. "I'll bet you can't wait to get out of those pants."

Any American guy would have been all over her at that point, flirting back for all he was worth. But these Soviet guys were just too beaten down. *Communism must be hell on a guy's sex drive*, Rina decided.

She rode the elevator up to the eleventh floor and got out. When she opened the door to the super-expensive executive suite that she shared with Axel, she found a red-white-and-blue airmail package on the big four-poster bed. It was addressed to her.

She'd seen packages like that before. Rina felt a nervous spike of dread as she opened it, as if she was about to reach

down into the guts of a ticking time bomb. And in a way, that's what it was... only the bomb part happened to be her and the package was the timer that set everything in motion and told her when – and *what* – to blow up. Of course, Rina didn't consciously know that. If she had, she would have simply thrown the package in the trash without opening it.

But *Vera* knew....

The package was from Doctor Smiley, her old pediatrician back in Kingsburg, California. Why her parents had made her stick with Doctor Smiley all these years, she'd never figured out. It would have made more sense to have a doctor on the coast, where they all lived now. But her dad, who was a chiropractor, insisted that Doctor Smiley knew her best. (*And my dad is kind of a doctor, too, so he should know, right?*) She'd been hospitalized a lot when she was little, and Doctor Smiley had really looked after her back then.

Inside the package, Rina found two orange prescription bottles with white childproof caps – the kind that always gave her trouble when she tried to open them. There was also a black videocassette and a plastic squeeze-bottle of what looked like Russian saline spray, or maybe a nasal decongestant. Nothing else.

One of the prescription bottles held a month's supply of lithium, which Rina had been taking since she was a teenager – although she tended to go off it when she had an acting job, because if she wasn't careful it could make her ass look fat. Doctor Smiley knew that. This was his subtle way of telling her to start back on it, now that the filming was over. Lithium was a natural earth element found in crystallized salt, he'd explained to her when she was

younger. Everyone had traces of it in their bodies, and you could find it in drinking water, so there was no reason to be afraid of taking it. Anyway, it really helped with her mood swings, which could get a bit extreme when she was off it, unless she happened to be taking the magic pills in Bottle #2.

Bottle #2 contained Doctor Smiley's own proprietary blend of psychopharmaceuticals. They were little blue-green gel caps that you couldn't buy in any pharmacy. You could only get them direct from Doctor Smiley. They were experimental, made in a Swiss lab or someplace like that. The medicine in them was supposed to be so new and cutting-edge that it didn't even have a name yet, just a long prescription number (CRM-114-CG2-488), so Rina couldn't look it up in a *Merck Manual* to see what the hell she was taking.

She did, however, know how the medicine made her feel when she was on it – and how it made her feel was absolutely fabulous. It was perfect for acting jobs, which is when she usually took it. It had a way of making her see herself at a distance, almost like she was an invisible angel hovering just above and behind her own body, watching that body as it performed in a sort of three-dimensional, hyper-real movie. Doctor Smiley called it “therapeutic dissociation.” It was a chemical way of letting her see herself as others saw her.

What was cool about it was that she had complete control – much *more* control over her body and her emotions than she had normally. She could do anything – cuss out Roman Polanski, drive against traffic on a busy L.A. freeway, shoot down a Boeing 747 off the northern coast of Moneron Island with an FIM-92B Stinger shoulder-mounted missile

launcher - anything at all, really, and her muscles and reflexes would perform flawlessly, she wouldn't feel any anxiety, and her brain would always be on top of the situation, two steps ahead of whatever was coming next. Plus, she would be totally horny. The little blue-green capsules in Bottle #2 made her feel like she was living the life of a rock star ninja nymphomaniac assassin.

If there was a downside, it was that the medicine tended to mess with her memory. The first time she took it, she blacked out and lost track of almost an entire week. She was up and walking around, doing stuff, acting perfectly normal - at least according to the people who'd seen her - but she couldn't remember anything at all from the two days before and the three days after she took that first blue-green capsule. It was like her memory of those days had been completely erased. It scared her. When she told Doctor Smiley about it, he said he'd readjust her dosage and she'd be fine. He asked her to try it one more time, while she was being monitored in the basement of his pediatric clinic. So she did. And that's when the absolutely fabulous part kicked in.

Hello, Vera! She must have had, like, fifty orgasms while she was waiting around for Doctor Smiley in that basement. For some reason, he had a big collection of gynecology tools down there, along with about a dozen high-tech dildos. She was bored and horny, so she ended up putting them to some very imaginative uses. It seemed perfectly normal at the time... less so when she remembered that Doctor Smiley's usual patients were almost all under the age of twelve. She also should have given a little more thought to the one-way mirror and the glass eyes of the video cameras pointing down at her from the four corners of the room.

Oh well... it was still a good drug. Over the years, she'd built up a tolerance to it. If she'd had any more blackouts, she didn't remember them. She would have happily taken the medicine every day, if she could, but Doctor Smiley said he didn't want her to grow dependent on it. So he only sent it to her when she was on a film set, or taking a trip somewhere.

Rina decided it was time to check out what was on the videocassette. Doctor Smiley sometimes videotaped messages for her from his office at the clinic. She got up off the bed and opened the cabinet under the TV set, where she found a sleek new Japanese VCR along with a shelf full of porn and Disney videos. Perks of the executive suite, like the bottles of Stolichnaya in the little refrigerator. She popped the videocassette into the front-loading slot on the Japanese VCR and found the remote to turn on the television. Then she went to the fridge for one of those bottles of vodka – Stoli Limonnaya, her new favorite – and unscrewed the cap. She also unscrewed the caps on the medicine bottles and took one pill from each of them, swallowing them down with a big swig of vodka. As the vodka pleasantly burned deep in her throat, Rina sat on the edge of the bed in front of the television and pressed PLAY on the remote.

"Hello, Rina!" The television lit up with the fat, froggy face of Doctor Smiley, seated at his desk. He was bald and bulgy-eyed, with a smile as wide as his red bow tie, which she'd never seen him without. Rina hated him and loved him all at the same time. "How's Moscow?" he asked her. He had the kind of booming voice that always came across as insincerely upbeat – like a backslapping, small-town

Buick dealer, or a Congressman up for re-election. "Are the Commies treating you well?"

Speed it up, Doctor Smiley, Rina thought to herself. *I can't talk back to you, so get to the point.*

"I hope you're watching this alone. If you're not, you need to be. What comes next is *For Your Eyes Only*." Doctor Smiley waggled his bushy eyebrows to emphasize the James Bond movie reference.

"Okay, I get it..." Rina sighed.

"You can't talk to Axel about this - or anyone else. And after you've watched this tape, you're going to take it apart and destroy it. Are we clear on that?"

Rina just rolled her eyes. It was all standard procedure. She'd been through it many times before.

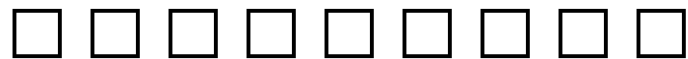
"Okay then. I want you to get into a relaxed position and start counting backwards from ten with me. Can you do that? *Ten...* every muscle in your body is starting to relax, freeing itself of tension...."

"*Ten.*" Rina said. She scooted back on the bed and propped some pillows behind her neck, giving herself a good view of the television, which had begun to emit a freaky, high-pitched noise - a noise like thousands of crickets chirping in an underground cavern where everything echoed and got louder and all mixed up. The picture on the TV set stalled, like the videotape was jamming, but she knew it wasn't that. Soon a flurry of pictures and words replaced the static shot of Doctor Smiley, a cascade of images moving so fast that it didn't seem possible for Rina to take them all in. Yet somehow she did. "*Nine...*" said Doctor Smiley from someplace deep

inside her head. "Going deeper now, into a state of perfect relaxation...."

"Nine," said Rina, her voice flat, already completely free of affect.

When they got down to One, Doctor Smiley's voice boomed out with a hearty "*Hello, Vera!*"



While Rina had only vague intimations of Vera's slutty existence, Vera knew everything there was to know about Rina. She had to, because Vera was expected to *be* Rina whenever people met her. Vera, however, was her own person (even though she shared Rina's body). She was an alter – a wholly individuated alternate personality.

People with alters were usually diagnosed by the medical community as having a mental disturbance called Multiple Personality Disorder, or sometimes, Dissociative Identity Disorder. MPD or DID... whatever they wanted to call it, they were wrong. It wasn't a disorder, or some type of insanity. It was a superior way of coping with an insane world.

When Rina's father had started having rough sex with her when she was a kindergartner – right on the altar of the Kingsburg United Methodist Church during a satanic black mass held every third Saturday at midnight – her psyche had split in two. Extreme trauma will do that to a person. When the nastiness had first occurred, Rina retreated into a safe compartment deep inside her mind, where she couldn't be touched by the hairy man-beast in red satin vestments humping away at her (she couldn't admit to herself, then or anytime later, that it was her own doting

but deranged dad doing the humping). In her place, a new personality emerged – stronger, smarter, unafraid, and more in touch with the crueler manifestations of human sexuality – a personality willing to *fuck back*, if that's what was necessary:

Vera.

She stood at the foot of the bed in the executive suite of the Hotel Metropol, naked, breaking open Doctor Smiley's blue-green gel caps from Bottle #2 and rubbing them on her erect nipples. On the television in front of her, there was a still-frame of a man's face: Vladislav Lukyanenko, her new target. Vera had heightened visual acuity and a nearly perfect photographic memory. She wouldn't have any trouble remembering Lukyanenko's face when she looked for him later at the wrap party.

After she finished smearing the fourth broken gel cap on her left areola, Vera bent over to eject the videocassette from the VCR. She started unspooling its black magnetic tape, crumpling it up into a big ball as she went. When the videocassette was empty, she stuffed the ball of magnetic tape into the airmail box and set it aflame in the bathtub, after first disabling the smoke alarm. It made a charred, Chernobyl-like mess that would probably never come out of the tub's porcelain, but that wasn't her problem. She'd tell Axel that her black negligée had caught on fire while she was trying to freebase some coke – and she'd had to dispose of it in a hurry. He'd probably find that believable enough, although he might feel obliged to give her another one of his paternalistic lectures about the evils of blow (while ignoring the fact that he did a ton of it himself), so the lie was far from perfect.

When you had to lie as often as Vera did, it really helped to have an eidetic memory. Rina was particularly screwed in that regard, but at least she got to keep the illusion that her adoring daddy would never do anything to harm his little girl.

Vera slipped into some clean black crotchless panties and a low-cut sapphire blue Spandex top with a matching miniskirt. *No need for a bra - it would just get in the way tonight....* After digging around in her suitcase, she came up with a lacy black garter belt and a matching pair of fishnet stockings. *Might as well tart myself up a bit, considering the evening's assignment....* Shiny black leather spike heel boots completed the outfit.

She checked her little black Chanel purse, making sure she had lipstick, rubles, credit cards, and the bottle of Russian nasal spray. Then she put on the full-length arctic fox fur coat that Axel had given her a few weeks earlier as a Thank You gift for getting through a particularly grueling day on the set involving a circus bear and a horde of Serbian midgets wearing diapers. She looked at herself in the mirror. *Gorgeous.* She was ready for battle.

Vladislav Lukyanenko, she thought to herself, you're about to get fucked.

THE INVISIBLE COLLEGE

The timeless eternal present on the Other Side

We didn't fall from grace. We were pushed.

We still lunge down, over the cliff and into temporal existence, whenever we want a cheap thrill. No one sees us. We speak without being heard. We watch. We listen. But we don't interfere and we leave behind no trace of our existence.

Does that make us ghosts? Hardly. "Fuck that..." as we all used to say. We're more like walkers between worlds. Spies sent into life by the forces of death. Or whatever.

Before we crossed to the Other Side, there were six of us in a sky blue Bentley: Gordon, D.H., Skip, Twinker, Jimmy, and Jimmy's Uncle Lloyd. Five teenagers and one obese, obscenely rich adult on a road trip to Big Sur.

It was a warm spring night. The top was down and Lloyd was driving. He was taking us to see a friend of his at the Esalen Institute. A man named Doctor Rob Felix, an expert mind control deprogrammer. Why some of us were in need of mind control deprogramming... well, that's a long story.

Twinker, Skip's girlfriend, sat catatonic in the backseat. Earlier, she'd tried to kill herself by hurling her body across the Bentley's trunk into oncoming traffic. Somehow, her suicide-programmed OMEGA alter had been triggered. Skip had caught her just in time.

Gordon was next to go. A narcoleptic since his early adolescence (that's why we called him "Crash"), Gordon was having a private conversation with Lloyd when he was suddenly overcome by sleep, an instant paralysis of dreaming. He fell sideways into Lloyd's blubbery arms, compromising his steering, just as the Bentley was traversing a sweeping curve along a high ocean cliff. We hit a guardrail and bounced off it. Then Lloyd regained control of the vehicle and brought us to a stop.

We were safe. Or so we thought.

Jimmy and Lloyd got out of the car to inspect the damage. Lloyd said the fender was crumpled, but we could keep going. But then the inside of the windshield went white with the reflection of otherworldly headlights. D.H. and Skip turned around in the backseat just in time to see a black, early-sixties Lincoln Continental furiously bearing down on them.

They'd seen that car before. It belonged to the Men in Black.

Skip and D.H. were rocked by the horrid jolt of the collision. The sky tilted and they felt a rapidly accelerating momentum as the Bentley went scraping past the guardrail and plummeted toward the sea. A sensation beyond even panic blazed through them as the wind roared in their ears and their butts drifted free of the backseat.

They knew they were about to die.

Skip held on tight to Twinker, while D.H. grabbed the headrest in front of him, where Gordon remained slumped, dreaming away. Time slowed way down. Then, with a crinkly pop - like bubble wrap being torn off a package - Skip and D.H. found themselves floating outside their

bodies. An instant later, the Bentley smashed below them into the cradle formed by two gnarled, rust-colored boulders jutting above the foaming waves.

D.H. observed with an astonishing lack of concern that his body had been decapitated upon impact – guillotined on the Bentley’s shattered windshield. “Look, Ma: No head!” he said. Skip watched, unperturbed, as his body – along with Twinker’s – sunk under the cold green waves and drowned. A few seconds later, Twinker flung herself up from the sea and joined them in the air above the mangled Bentley, where Gordon remained, curled up under the dash, broken and bleeding, but still alive.

“¡Hola, guys! Pretty weird, huh?” said Twinker.

“Fuckin’ freaky....” Skip agreed. He gave Twinker a big astral hug. He was starting to remember situations no less freaky that he’d been in before. This wasn’t his first time being dead.

It wasn’t the first time for any of us. In fact, we’d planned to die that way long before we were even born, knowing that if the three of us died at the same place and time, we would become one.

The Men in Black probably weren’t counting on that when they pushed us over the cliff.

We three combined have stronger abilities than we would apart. Our memories from our previous lives are more intact. We have new powers of creation, denied to all but a few of the newly dead. We used those new powers to create an interdimensional portal near the site of our deaths, known only to us. We lunge down and we’re back in Big Sur. Sort of.

In the meantime, or non-time, in the timeless eternal present on the Other Side, we take stock, we plan new lives – multiple lives – that will be taking place, from our vantage point, all at once. Does that make us angels? Have we risen to heaven? The answer is: yes and no. Here, in the continuum between pure spirit and gross physical matter (what some call the Bardo), there are multiple heavens... and multiple hells.

Many of the heavens are ruled by the Archons. Those particular heavens have been created to deceive. The Archons are psychic vampires. They pose as gods and feed off the psychic energy of others so they won't have to incarnate, like normal souls.

Archons fear incarnation – with good reason. Incarnation (and reincarnation) basically sucks. But most of us do it, anyway, because the alternative is ethically and morally repugnant.

Our astral bodies (or souls) are nourished by the psychic energy we generate and store up while we're incarnated in physical bodies. We exist on the Other Side only for as long as that stored up psychic energy lasts. Then we have to reincarnate to fuel up again, so to speak. That's a vast oversimplification of the complex interrelationship between physical matter and astral matter, of course, but we'll explain more as we go along. The main thing to understand, right now, is that the Archons manage to remain on the Other Side by means of psychic vampirism – a kind of soul cannibalism. It's similar to the Christian sacrament known as the Eucharist, when communicants eat the body and blood of Christ, only in reverse. This time it's a false Christ – or just about any other Salvationist god you were taught to worship in earthly life – eating YOU.

We know it's sick and wrong to eat other souls, so we reincarnate.

We've learned to recognize the Archons for what they are (a lot of souls haven't) and whenever we see one, we say, "Bite me." But we never actually let them do it.

Others like us have formed a sort of political faction on the Other Side that opposes the Archons. We call ourselves the Invisible College.

While we're incarnated on Earth, we're also known as the Brotherhood of Light. The earthly emissaries of the Archons are known as the Dark Brotherhood. Two opposing teams. Two opposing goals. It's like a spiritual football game.

Have you given much thought to which side you're on?

NO HELP FOR THE WIDOW'S SON

*Mid-Afternoon, January 22, 1984
The Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California*

The man from the Scottish Rite Psychophrenic Research Program introduced himself as Bill Johnson. He was gaunt, tense, and thin-lipped, with gluey white skin and a crescent of mouse brown hair fringing his otherwise bald head. His unusually protuberant eyes peered out from behind gold-rimmed aviator-style bifocals. Everything about him suggested he was short on humor, except for his odd taste in clothes. He wore black wingtip dress shoes, black double-knit slacks, and a mauve tie-dyed T-shirt featuring a Grateful Dead screen print of a grinning lady skeleton with a bouffant of red roses blooming from her skull.

"I see you've gone native," Gordon said from his wheelchair.

The wheelchair wasn't strictly necessary. Gordon was learning to walk again after a devastating car crash some six months earlier, just before his seventeenth birthday. Most of the time now, he could get around on his own, but it was difficult when he was tired - and the prospect of the meeting today had made him feel more tired than usual.

"I spilled coffee on my suit this morning," Bill Johnson explained with a frown, tugging on the front of the galling T-shirt. "One of the cafeteria workers gave me this to wear until I can get back to my hotel room in Carmel."

"I was expecting to see Doctor Felix today. What happened?"

"Who told you Doctor Felix would be here?"

"Lloyd Marrsden - the guy who set me up in the 'work scholar' program here at Esalen. He was always going on and on about his great pal, Rob Felix, the expert mind control deprogrammer. He said he'd fix me right up."

Bill Johnson sighed and cast his weird eyes about the room, scowling with disapproval. It was a nice room, in Gordon's opinion: redwood plank walls, batik pillows on Shaker-style furniture, and a large window with a view of the shimmering blue Pacific out beyond the cliffs of Big Sur. In its brochures and newsletters, the Esalen Institute always emphasized the sacred beauty of its setting, and Gordon thought there was something to that. Bill Johnson, apparently, did not.

"Doctor Robert H. Felix is our research director at the Scottish Rite Psychophrenic Research Program. I know he's been made aware of your situation, but I don't think it was ever his intention to come out here to see you in person."

"So he just blew me off, huh? Well, then have a seat, Jerry Garcia...." Gordon gestured toward the couch. "You're making me nervous, standing there."

Bill Johnson sat, but he wasn't done explaining. "Doctor Felix is a very busy man, as I'm sure you must know. He's also turning eighty this year. So it's difficult for him to travel far from home - which is in Massachusetts."

"So you're his errand boy?"

"That's not how I'd describe my role here today."

"Lackey, then?"

"Can you tell me where this hostility is coming from, Gordon?"

"Well, here's the thing, Bill: I'm not so sure I need any mind control deprogramming in the first place, but if I do, I sure don't want it being done by some random guy in a Grateful Dead T-shirt who just shows up without any recommendations from the people I trust."

"So trust is an issue with you. And you trust Lloyd Marrsden?"

"I was starting to."

"Was? Past tense?"

Now it was Gordon's turn to sigh. "My dad died in a plane crash when I was a kid and I guess I was looking for a surrogate father figure. For a while there, Lloyd kind of fit the bill. You're a shrink... you understand stuff like that, right?"

"I'm not a 'shrink' - I'm a psychiatrist. But yes, I understand 'stuff like that'... so go on."

"So, anyway... I was starting to trust Lloyd, but then the car he was driving was pushed off a cliff - with me and my friends in it. You see this wheelchair? I didn't get here by accident. Obviously, trust is a *huge* issue with me these days."

"Do you think he was somehow responsible?"

"For what? Pushing me off the cliff? That's not how it happened, at least according to Lloyd. Me, I can't exactly remember... I was asleep when the other car rammed into us."

"Can you tell me what you know about Lloyd Marrsden?"

“Why? I thought you knew him. Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“Yes. He’s been associated with our organization for years. But I’m curious to know how *you* perceive him.”

“If I start telling you what I know about Lloyd Marrsden, you’ll think I’ve lost my fucking mind.”

“I can assure you, I won’t.”

“But isn’t that what the Scottish Rite Psychophrenic Research Program is all about? It’s a bunch of thirty-third degree Freemasons studying crazy people. Psychophrenic is just a polite term for schizophrenia, right?”

“I don’t think you’re schizophrenic, Gordon.”

“If you did, you wouldn’t tell me. That would defeat the purpose. You’re here to conduct research.”

“I’m here to help you, if I can.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Yes, we’ll see. So tell me about Lloyd Marrsden.”

“It’s kind of a long story.”

“I don’t have anywhere else to go. We have all day.”

“No, I mean it’s a *really* long story. Like, in a day, we could only hit the highlights. And the highlights won’t make much sense unless you know the backstory. And the backstory could take weeks. In fact, I’ve spent the past few months thinking about it and I *still* haven’t pieced it all together.”

“Well, let’s just start with the highlights then. How did you meet Lloyd?”

“He’s the rich uncle of my best friend, Jimmy Marrsden. I met him at a Halloween party, at his house in Kingsburg, when I was fifteen or sixteen years old.”

“See? That wasn’t hard.”

“Yeah, but it gets more complicated. While I was at that party, Lloyd got me drunk on absinthe up in his office, where he gave me a big lecture on the Templars and the Freemasons. Then, when I was just about ready to pass out, he told me that my parents had alien genes in their DNA. Specifically, he said my dad had tall, blonde, Nordic alien-human hybrids on his side of the family, known throughout history as the Nephilim. And my mom supposedly has some Aryan alien genetic engineering in her that dates all the way back to the founding of civilization in Sumer about six thousand years ago. Which means she’s partly descended from a long line of giant, pain-sucking reptilians.”

AN OCCURRENCE AT SAN SIMEON CREEK

*Just after midnight, February 29, 1984
San Simeon, California*

Josh had been talking that night about how all the bummers and bad trips in your life kept piling up inside until it got to the point where you had to let some of it out, or else you'd go insane. Skeeze had pondered that unsubtle psychological equation over many cans of Coors with Josh while they listened to David Bowie's *Diamond Dogs* album and *Transformer* by Lou Reed. Somewhere during Lou's "Walk On the Wild Side" Josh had produced some Humboldt sinsemilla to spark some cosmic intuitions and it had been decided that the best way to relieve the intense pressures of being Josh and Skeeze would be to indulge in some midnight cow tipping.

Now, with his buzz wearing off, Skeeze was starting to wonder just what the hell he'd been thinking. It was cold as a witch's tit out on San Simeon Creek Road and all he was wearing was a black Mr. Zog's Sex Wax hoodie and black drawstring sweatpants. Josh had insisted they both wear black so the cows wouldn't see them coming. Easy for him to say, since Josh was already wearing a long black wool overcoat, black jeans, and his usual black knit watchman's cap (to hide his prematurely balding scalp). Skeeze, however, didn't own much in the way of cold-weather ninja

gear. His only other clothing option had been his black O'Neill wetsuit with the blue neoprene stripes running up the sides, which kept him toasty-warm while he was surfing, but for cow tipping he thought that might look a little gay.

Fucking Josh! thought Skeeze. *Why do I let him talk me into so many screwed-up scenes?*

Partly, he knew, it was because Josh had charisma and a good weed connection. If Skeeze had been less of a stoner, he and Josh might not have been such good friends. But Skeeze really liked getting high and Josh could score almost anything: Acapulco Gold, Panama Red, Columbian... even the super-rare Michoacán Icepack, which Thomas Pynchon had supposedly smoked while he was writing *Gravity's Rainbow*. Someday Skeeze wanted to be a famous novelist, too, but it was hard to find time to write when your surfer bros were constantly dropping by to tell you to get your ass back in the waves. So mainly he just read a lot of books.

Skeeze had a depraved Old English Sheepdog named Coyote who was padding along ahead of them, sniffing at trees and occasionally stopping to scratch at the sand fleas in his long, seaweed-flecked grey and white coat. As dogs go, Coyote was bigger and hornier than most. Last April, during a moment of ill-conceived infatuation, Coyote had chased a Guernsey cow right over the edge of a cliff. There had been witnesses. To make restitution to the splattered Guernsey's owner - a hard-assed rancher named Phil DeSoto - Skeeze had been forced to spend the whole summer working as a clerk at the Cambria Shell station, pumping gas and selling synthetic-cheese-glopped nachos and 64-ounce Ty-D-Bol Blue Slurpees to all the tourists driving in from the Pacific Coast Highway. That was the

other part of why he was out there, freezing his balls off: Skeeze had it in for cows. Truly.

“This looks good,” said Josh, pointing out some dark silhouettes shaped like cows standing in the distance. “Let’s hop the fence right here.”

It was Hearst property. They would be trespassing on what was probably the best-guarded ranch on the Central Coast of California. Years ago, the Hearst family had donated Hearst Castle to the state in exchange for a huge property tax reduction, not realizing that there was much more money to be had by turning the hundred-and-sixty-five-room castle into a tourist attraction – which the state promptly did. The long-standing rumor around town was that the Hearsts were pissed that the state hadn’t cut them in on the action, and now the family was scheming to put up a bunch of hotels on the land they had left over, so they could cash in on the influx of tourists – over a million willing suckers forking over their hard-earned vacation dollars each and every year. On this particular piece of Hearst property, where Josh was already climbing over the barbed wire fence, there was a tidy adobe ranch house less than half a mile away where the chief scion himself – William Randolph Hearst, Jr. – was known to stay for part of every year. Skeeze was fairly certain the sleeping billionaire would have elaborate security systems in place to thwart any potential midnight cow tippers.

The other fucked-up thing was that they might run into zebras out there. The Hearsts had zebras mixed in with their cattle, for reasons having to do with the old zoo that William Randolph Hearst used to have up by the castle. Everyone seemed to like the zebras – they lent an African savannah-like mystique to the low pastures down along the

highway, much appreciated by passing motorists – but for all Skeeze knew, zebras could be vicious if you ran into them after dark. He could easily imagine a bunch of them ganging up and trampling the shit out of him, mistaking him for a hyena. Maybe he had an irrational fear of zebras, but those black and white stripes – so much like old-fashioned prison uniforms – made zebras seem untrustworthy to him.

Oh, what the hell... Skeeze thought, getting a grip. *At least death by zebra trampling would be better than working as a clerk at the Shell station for another summer.* He held up the lowest strand of barbed wire so Coyote could crawl under. Coyote would just start howling if they left him on the other side of the fence.

“C’mon dude...” Josh whispered. “When we get close, I’ll take the front shoulder and you take the back. Team effort.” Josh crept like a silent assassin in a Hong Kong kung fu movie toward the nearest cow-like form. Coyote crept with him, a shaggy stalker in sheepdog’s clothing. As they drew closer, Skeeze could make out their target: another Guernsey. Coyote’s raw pink dog bone was probably rock-hard by now.

The cow was calmly chewing cud. She wasn’t sleeping. Cows, Skeeze knew, didn’t really sleep standing up. Their knees didn’t lock in place, either. Tipping a cow was much harder than most people thought. This cow in particular, however, was oblivious – and that’s all that really counted.

On Josh’s signal, they both rushed forward and tackled the cow. She went down on her side with a surprised bellow and a ground-shaking thump. Josh fell across the cow’s neck and got up laughing. Coyote let out a happy yelp and ducked his furry face between the cow’s twitching hindquarters, licking at her big bovine vagina.

Oh no! Foreplay! thought Skeeze.

The sideways slumped cow was acting stunned. Soon Coyote was hunched on top of her, humping away in a hypnotic frenzy. Skeeze backed up a few steps. The cow in the moonlight seemed to be getting a vigorous scrubbing from an enormous, filthy mop.

“Coyote! Down boy!” Skeeze commanded in a low voice, but it was no use. Coyote was grooving on the deep, nirvana-inducing bliss of dog-on-cow Tantra. He was beyond the reach of mere words.

The cow started mooing, way too loud. It didn’t sound like a cow in pain. It actually sounded more like encouragement: *Fuck my sloppy wet cow-hole, you big, hairy monster dog! Moo! Fuck me! Moo-ooo! Fuck me harder!*

Skeeze had been perusing maybe a tad too much porn lately. His nickname hadn’t resulted from any sort of affinity for the Puritan lifestyle, after all. Skeeze was a corruption of his given name, Steve. Much of that corruption had been self-inflicted.

Under different circumstances, Skeeze might have basked in the reflected glory of Coyote’s sexual prowess, but right at that moment he was feeling on edge, too tightly wound. The cow’s crazy mooing was sure to attract someone’s attention soon. The Hearsts probably had more than a dozen burly psycho-cowboys employed as security guards. Skeeze imagined a badass brigade in Tony Lama boots stomping toward them, waving shotguns and electric cattle prods. He wanted to get the hell out of there. Fast.

“Josh! Let’s bail, dude!” Skeeze tried to put a laidback surfer spin on the words to hide the twitchy animal fear

rising up in him. Most of the time, he wasn't such a wuss. Only a few weeks ago, he'd seen a big shark swim right past him while he was out catching waves and he just calmly got on his board and rode in to shore. For some reason, he was more afraid now, standing around in front of a dumb, orgasming cow.

Josh just kept laughing and thrusting his hips back and forth in a lewd pantomime of Coyote. He wasn't going anywhere. He was too busy enjoying the show.

Skeeze sensed someone watching them from the dark forest of Monterey Pines off to their right – someone with the pitiless black eyes of an owl or a reptile. The sensation was so fucking creepy that it made the hair prickle on the back of his neck. Then he noticed a weird sound coming from somewhere close by – sort of an insect noise, like hundreds of crickets chirping in a field of dry summer grass, only faster and more high-pitched. The air around him seemed to warp and pulsate with it. It was freaking him the fuck out.

Suddenly a light clicked on in the sky above their heads – a misty blue beam, as big around as an elevator shaft. It lit up the cow and Coyote in a luminous circle of blue on the ground. Coyote paused from his frenzied humping long enough to let loose an angry growl.

Looking up, Skeeze saw a huge black triangle in the sky, as wide across as a football field, with blinking red-orange lights at each of its three points. The blue laser-like beam was shining down from its center. Skeeze had always wanted to see a UFO, but now that he was standing right under one, he didn't like the idea so much. He was so frightened that he sprawled to his knees.

Coyote and the cow went tumbling up into the misty blue light beam - and then Josh, too - as if all three of them were being sucked up through a gigantic, invisible vacuum cleaner tube. *They've got my dog!* Skeeze thought, desperate and sad, not realizing until a few moments later that his foremost concern should have been for his levitated pal, Josh. Maybe they weren't such good friends, after all.

A hole spiraled open at the top of the blue light. Coyote, then the still-mooing cow, and then Josh all disappeared inside its inky black void. Then the hole closed up and the blue light blinked off. Skeeze took that as his cue to start running. He was over the barbed wire fence before he even knew what he was doing, then sprinting balls-out down the road toward his beat-to-shit Ford Econoline van, parked in a gravel turnout near the edge of the creek. All he could hear was the wet *flap-flapping* of his tennis shoes on the pavement and the sound of his own ragged breathing.

Oh shit, oh shit... I gotta tell people about this! he was thinking. *Even though nobody'll ever fucking believe me.*

Just as he reached the van, the noise started up again - that freaky alien insect chirping - and Skeeze knew he was busted. The driver's side door was locked. As he reached for his keys, the blue light hit him full in the face and he felt his feet leave the ground. He noticed that his skin was tingling all over, like after a really good bong hit. He started to relax and get a woodie - kind of surprising, considering how scared shitless he'd been just two seconds earlier. As his body tilted and Skeeze rose toward the opening in the flying black triangle, he found himself wondering:

So do the Hearsts have aliens working their security detail, or... what?



THE WORLD ACCORDING TO LLOYD

*Mid-Afternoon, January 22, 1984
The Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California*

“*Reptilians....*” Bill Johnson was staring at the floor with his lips pulled back in a prim grimace, as if a grotesque bullfrog had just hopped into the room and vomited psychedelic tadpoles all over his shiny black wingtip shoes. “And do these Sumerian reptile-aliens have a name?” he asked Gordon, heavy on the sarcasm.

“In the world according to Lloyd, they’re called the *Anunnaki*,” Gordon answered. “Only you’re not supposed to say their name out loud. If you do, they’ll remote-view your location and come after your sorry ass – even in a nowhere little farm town like Kingsburg, where I grew up.”

“And you know this for a fact? Or is this just another one of Lloyd Marrsden’s fanciful speculations?”

“I saw it happen, actually. On the day of the crash, when Lloyd was driving us past the Lemoore Naval Air Station, he slipped up and said *Anunnaki* out loud. Actually, he barely whispered it to me, but within, like, three minutes, this old Lincoln Continental – like the one Kennedy got shot in – was pulling up alongside us on the freeway, and two Men in Black started yelling at us, saying we’d better stop listening to Lloyd or we’d be in deep shit.”

“Men in Black?”

“Transdimensional trickster entities that go around pretending they’re government agents in cheap black suits. They show up at a lot of places where UFOs or aliens have been seen and they tell people not to talk about that stuff. And they *really* don’t like people talking about the *Anunnaki*.”

“But you’re saying the word now.”

“I know. To psyche myself up for this meeting, I said it out loud a little earlier this morning, too – and nothing happened. Maybe I’m not pronouncing it right. Anu-naki... *Anunnaki*... ugh. See? My tongue gets all tangled up. Why don’t you try it?”

“*Anunnaki*...” said Bill, sounding like a peevish Sumerian warlord.

“Whoa! That’s even better than Lloyd! Do you have a Sumerian girlfriend or something?” Gordon was just blowing smoke, trying to get Bill to lighten up.

“I’m more fluent in Akkadian, but the two languages are quite similar,” Bill replied with no trace of humor.

“No shit! You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you, Bill? Did you have to learn Akkadian to become a thirty-third degree Mason?”

“It’s not required, but it certainly helped. Some of the Ancient Mysteries revealed to us upon attaining the thirty-third degree are best experienced in the mother tongue.”

“Man, you Freemasons are so fucking out there.... No wonder Lloyd thought my mom was an alien lizard queen. With a head full of Akkadian and a bunch of Ancient Mysteries to puff him up, he must’ve been primed to swallow a whole boatload of Masonic bullshit.”

“But *you* were the one who said the Men in Black came after you. Transdimensional tricksters... how do you explain *that*, if it's not, uhm, just 'Masonic bullshit'?”

“Look: I know how crazy all this sounds, but I'm just telling you what happened. If you want to make judgments about it, go ahead. But you shouldn't rush to judge things you don't fully understand.”

“So help me understand, Gordon. How did the Men in Black find you? You say Lloyd whispered a word – *Anunnaki* – inside a car that was speeding along a freeway? And they somehow picked up on that?”

“Yeah, like I said, with remote viewing.”

“Explain remote viewing to me.”

“Remote viewing is a psychic ability. It's a weird combination of clairvoyance and astral projection that allows people – or, in this case, shape-shifting, pedophile lizard monsters – to 'view' things with their mind's eye anywhere in the world without actually having to be there in person. All a remote viewer needs is a set of map coordinates – longitude and latitude – or a rarely used keyword, like *Anunnaki*.”

“You have to admit, that sounds rather implausible.”

“You'd think so, right? But believe it or not, the CIA has been plowing some serious cash into remote viewing research. Psychic spying – what could be better? They started funding the first experiments in remote viewing at the Stanford Research Institute back in the early nineteen-seventies. Two high-ranking Scientologists headed up those experiments, Hal Puthoff and Ingo Swann – a laser physicist and a New York City psychic. Together, they figured out a teaching method for remote viewing – basically, *A How-To*

Guide for Downloading Non-Local Information From the Implicate Order, to put it in their terms. By 1979, it was being used to create an Army barracks full of psychic spies for the Defense Intelligence Agency under Project GRILL FLAME. Of course, this is all highly classified information, but Lloyd swore he had the inside scoop.”

“If it’s highly classified, how does Lloyd Marrsden know so much about it?”

“You tell me... he’s a slippery, shady kind of guy, that Lloyd Marrsden. I have no idea how deep his Masonic connections really go. As best as I can make out, Lloyd sells insurance to NASA, SRI, and the rocket industry, but that seems to be just a cover for his full-time job as a black ops bagman for what he calls ‘the medico-military-occult complex.’ According to Lloyd, each month millions of dollars in unaudited government funds pass through his company on their way to ‘black budget’ programs all across the country – courtesy of his bogus insurance payouts. He told me that at least 30 *billion* U.S. dollars gets passed around that way every year through people like him.”

“And why wouldn’t the government just send those funds out directly?”

“My guess’d be *politics....* By using Lloyd’s company, there’s no congressional oversight, so the U.S. government gets a free pass – plausible deniability. You probably heard about the huge political shitstorm that went down when *The New York Times* and the Church Committee went public with the CIA’s MKULTRA experiments in mind control. That’s right up your alley, isn’t it?”

“I’ve looked into it, but Richard Helms testified before Congress that he shut MKULTRA down and destroyed all records of it in 1972 or ‘73.”

"It just went black under a different name, according to Lloyd. They're still at it. Helms was the first and only Director of Central Intelligence to be convicted of lying to the U.S. Congress - although George Bush should've been nailed for that same crime. I'm sure voters would be less-than-thrilled with some of the black budget projects the Reagan administration has been funding with their taxes, but without congressional oversight they'll likely never find out about them."

"And you think voters have the right to know about these projects, even though they might involve issues of national security?"

"Of course I think the voters should know - especially if our national security state is targeting its own people and compromising their civil rights while making them pay for it. That's how Lloyd justifies his snooping, by the way... he skims a little off the top of each transaction and then makes a hobby out of watching where the rest of the money goes - because even though his company's name is on the checks, it's really taxpayers' money, and Lloyd likes to think of himself as just a typical concerned citizen who wants to know how his tax dollars are being spent."

"I can say with complete confidence that Lloyd Marrsden is not your typical concerned citizen."

"Yeah... and as he found out, the money that passes through his company is getting spent in some incredibly fucked-up ways."

"Such as?"

"Such as kids getting tortured and hypnotized so they'll grow up to be zombie assassins."

BAREBACK IN THE U.S.S.R.

*Evening, November 22, 1987
Moscow*

The wrap party at the Godunov was already in full swing by the time Vera got there. She walked up the red carpet leading to the restaurant wearing oversized Chanel sunglasses, with two extremely large Russian Wolfhounds straining at the leashes wrapped around her pale, slender wrists – a bit of theatricality that Axel had requested of her, hoping it would translate into some useful publicity photos. The wolfhounds had minor, non-sexual roles in *Stalin Says*. Vera shuddered to think how Udo Salmanski would have deployed them.

“Miss Rowley!” the boldest among a gaggle of Soviet paparazzi called out to her. “It would please us for you to pose for us, please!”

Vera struck a regal pose with the wolfhounds at her side, in the fashion of Helmut Newton. The cameras flashed. Then she opened her fur coat and bared her cleavage with her lips curled back in defiance and her hands placed high on her hips, clutching Spandex. The cameras flashed again. Rapidly.

Once she was inside, there were air-kisses all around. She found Axel back in the VIP room, mixing it up with a crowd of Russian mobster-types, sycophants, and the usual film

industry narcissists. Vera could tell at a glance that he was drunk and coked up to the gills. *Fucking hypocrite....*

"Hey baby," Axel said, giving her a long, wet kiss with too much tongue. "Can I get you and the wolfhounds a drink?"

"I can't speak for the dogs, but I'll have a glass of champagne," said Vera. It wasn't a good idea to mix booze with Doctor Smiley's nympho-ninja medicine, but after seeing Axel's condition, she really didn't care.

As Axel tried to flag down a waitress, Vera scanned the room, looking for her target. The Godunov inhabited an old monastery: high vaulted ceilings, heavy Russian woodwork, and a whiff of spiritual desecration. The domed VIP room was painted yellow with a spiraling blue-and-orange Mandelbrot-like vine motif that reminded her of the phosphenes that she saw when she closed her eyes and pressed her fists against them just a bit too hard. It was already giving her a headache.

Lukyanenko wasn't anywhere to be seen. "Actually, I think I'll go check out the bar," Vera said. "Think you can handle the wolfhounds?" She handed Axel their leashes.

"I've always been more of a cat person," he said, taking the leashes, anyway.

Vera caught the subtext. As if on cue, she leaned in close to Axel and flicked her tongue in his ear, whispering loud enough to be overheard: "You can play with my pussy all you want later, but right now I really need a drink."

As she sauntered away, Vera glanced back over her shoulder and saw Axel looking pleased.

Men are so pathetically easy to figure out....

A loud Russian folk music trio was entertaining the guests in the bar: mustachioed men in Cossack costumes playing

an accordion, a stand-up bass, and a triangle-shaped guitar known as the *balalaika*. While Vera watched, a jowly, middle-aged woman danced over and joined them. She was wearing a long red-and-white brocaded *sarafan* with a red beaded *kokoshnik* on her head – which made her look like the Pope in drag. The jowly woman started singing something in Russian while egregiously shaking her *buben*.

Vera hadn't had much to do during her stay in Russia (while Rina had been occupied as an actress), so she'd passed the time by boning up on Russian terminology. Although she knew the names of all the instruments, she couldn't say she was a big fan of the native music. That flabby broad in the Pope robes sounded like she was gagging on about a gallon of *borscht*.

There! There he was: Vladislav Lukyanenko. He was standing in a dark corner off to the right and far behind the folk musicians, all by himself. Vera walked right over to him.

"I hope you're up next," she said to him.

"Pardon?"

"You're singing next, right?" Vera playfully poked his chest. "I mean, I hope so... because that weird-looking Pope lady just isn't doing it for me."

Lukyanenko grinned at her. "I have to confess, I'm not much of a singer."

"Too bad. What are you then? A juggler? A magician? Hey... can I be your assistant?" Vera spread her arms wide and did a little curtsy, as if David Copperfield had just lifted the curtain on yet another stage-vanished Siberian tiger. Her fur coat fell open, revealing her breasts firmly outlined beneath the second skin of sapphire blue Spandex.

Lukyanenko, trying not to stare – and failing – said: “Sadly, I’m just a journalist.”

“You speak really good English for a journalist.”

“Yes, well, it’s our stock in trade, isn’t it? We’re supposed to have a way with words.”

“I meant for a *Russian* journalist.”

“Oh. Well, I write for the *Guardian*, in London, if the truth must be told. I’m their Moscow correspondent.”

“And how’s that working out for you?”

“Very well, thank you. My star seems to be rising, thanks to the recent spat between Gorbachev and Yeltsin.”

“Who’s Yeltsin?” Vera asked, a bit confused. Lukyanenko wasn’t turning out to be anything like what she’d expected.

“Up until a few weeks ago, Boris Yeltsin had been the *de facto* ‘Mayor’ of Moscow,” Lukyanenko explained to her. “He was also a member of the Soviet Politburo, but he tendered his resignation last month after accusing Gorbachev and the Politburo of dragging their feet on social reforms. He also accused Gorbachev’s wife, Raisa, of meddling in affairs of state, much the same as Nancy Reagan has meddled in *your* country’s affairs. But I’m assuming you’re an American. Am I right?”

“Yeah... but I’m not an Ugly American, if you know what I mean,” Vera said with a coy smile.

“I know *exactly* what you mean,” Lukyanenko said with a lusty gaze at her tits. He looked around to make sure they were still alone. “Anyway, there’s no harm in telling you that I’ve been coordinating a bit of a smear campaign against Yeltsin with my colleagues over at *Pravda*. It’s common knowledge that he can be a heavy drinker at times, and also

somewhat of a hypochondriac. So we're just upping the ante with unsubstantiated reports that Yeltsin brushes his teeth with vodka every morning, or that a groundskeeper found him sleeping under a bush behind the Kremlin, passed out in his underpants. You know how it goes...."

"Sure. Insinuation makes shit happen. So how's Yeltsin holding up?"

"He's had a full-blown nervous breakdown!" Lukyanenko gloated, rubbing his nose. "He's been in the hospital for the last two weeks."

Vera's first impulse was to say, *You shouldn't brag about causing someone's nervous breakdown, motherfucker...* but pricking Lukyanenko's overinflated ego wasn't part of her seduction routine, so what she said instead was: "Wow, so you're kind of directing the course of Soviet political history from behind the scenes. But why pick on Yeltsin?"

"Because he's a bastard. A loud-mouthed marionette whose strings are being pulled by the Russian Mafia and the other unseen masters who truly run this country - and the world," said Lukyanenko, sniffing with disdain and obviously congested sinuses.

"Do you have a cold?" Vera asked him.

Lukyanenko shook his head. "Allergies," he answered. A glistening droplet of snot swayed on the end of his nose. He swiped it away. "Would you excuse me for a moment? I just need to make a quick trip to the men's."

"Sure. I'll be right here when you get back," Vera lied.

She waited for a full minute before she followed Lukyanenko's path to the men's room. Through a crack in the doorway, she saw him standing at the sink in front of a wall-to-wall mirror with a squeeze-bottle of Russian nasal

spray jammed way up inside his left nostril – the very same brand of Russian nasal spray that Vera happened to be carrying in her purse.

Lukyanenko turned around, startled, when Vera entered the bathroom and slammed the door, locking it behind her. “What are you doing?” he asked her, quickly trying to hide the bottle of nasal spray in the front pocket of his pants.

“If you were a woman, it would be called rape,” said Vera, getting right down to business. She shrugged off her fur coat and hung it on the toilet stall door. There was no need to sully her pristine Arctic Fox fur with a doomed journalist’s jism.

Lukyanenko sniffed. “You want to have sex with me? Right here?” He seemed to be considering the idea, tilting his head like a quizzical cockatoo eyeing a peanut.

“I want you to fuck me,” Vera said. The simple and direct approach always worked best, in her experience. She walked toward Lukyanenko and set her Chanel bag on the counter next to the sink. “You can do that for me, can’t you?”

“Well... if you insist.”

Vera hopped up on the edge of the sink and leaned back, exposing her throat to him. “*I insist...*” she whispered, her voice almost inaudible.

Lukyanenko took in the vampire victim tableaux and started kissing Vera’s throat. His newsroom nickname – “Vlad the Impaler” – had been bestowed on him for a reason, after all....

Vera grabbed Lukyanenko by the chin and kissed him hard, biting his lower lip. He kissed her back while tugging at the straps of her Spandex top. Vera pulled her arms

through the stretchy loops, so he could get at her breasts. Lukyanenko bent over her and started sucking on her nipples, licking them, teasing them with his tongue – all the while getting a wallop dose of Doctor Smiley’s special medicine.

Grabbing Lukyanenko’s belt, Vera undid the buckle while reaching into his pants at the same time to remove the squeeze-bottle of nasal spray. With the stealth of a pickpocket, she palmed it and slipped the bottle into her open Chanel bag, coming back out with the duplicate bottle that Doctor Smiley had sent to her. As Vera pulled down Lukyanenko’s zipper and let loose – *Holy fucking shit!* – one monster of a throbbing cock, she slid the duplicate bottle back into his front pocket without him noticing a thing.

“Make it good, my man in Moscow,” Vera murmured as she spread her legs for him.

“Wha’d you say?” Lukyanenko asked her, feeling woozy.

“I said, ‘Make it good...’ so you’ll remember me.”

But with Doctor Smiley’s special medicine coursing through his bloodstream, there was no way Lukyanenko could possibly make it good enough.



Three weeks later, after Rina’s (and consequently, Vera’s) return to California, a headline appeared beneath the fold on the front page of the *Guardian*:

RADIOACTIVE LINK TO DEAD MOSCOW CORRESPONDENT

In what may be the world's first case of murder by means of a nuclear isotope, British investigation into the death of Vladislav Valterovich Lukyanenko has determined that his poisoning and subsequent demise was caused by a "massive dose" of Polonium-210.

Lukyanenko, a Moscow correspondent for the *Guardian*, fell ill on November 25th and died of acute radiation syndrome on December 13th, after being flown from Moscow to a London hospital. British authorities discovered a bottle of nasal spray in Lukyanenko's possession that was contaminated with the radionuclide Polonium-210, an alpha-emitting substance that becomes lethal only when inhaled or ingested.

Days before his death, Lukyanenko issued a written statement blaming former Politburo member Boris Yeltsin and "the Soviet shadow elite" for ordering his execution. Moscow authorities dismissed the idea of a Soviet shadow elite as "conspiracy theory idiocy." Lukyanenko claimed he was unable to provide any further leads in the hunt for his suspected killer because his memory of the days preceding his sudden illness had been mysteriously occluded.

PSYCHIC KILLER (QU'EST-CE QUE C'EST?)

*Mid-Afternoon, January 22, 1984
The Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California*

“I’m not saying you *are* a paranoid schizophrenic, but has it ever crossed your mind that you might sound like one?”

“Oh, sure,” Gordon replied to Bill Johnson, taking no offense. “Remote viewing, alien DNA, Men in Black, secret government mind control programs that turn kindergartners into sleeper assassins... like I said, I know it sounds absolutely one-hundred-percent batshit crazy. But just remember, it was your Masonic brother, Lloyd Marrsden, who introduced me to all that stuff in the first place. Before *he* showed up, I was just a hick kid from Kingsburg whose biggest thrill was drinking beer at the drive-in with my buddies while we watched lesbian vampire movies.”

“Have you had any real-life encounters with lesbian vampires?”

“Not unless my mom counts, but I’m pretty sure she’s into guys.”

“And you’re sure Lloyd Marrsden isn’t just a shadow projection – a character you’ve dreamed up to embody your own darkness and paranoia?”

"If he is, then you must be one, too."

"But I'm right here in front of you. I'm entirely real."

"So you say."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Who? Lloyd? He visited me in the hospital right after I woke up from my coma."

"Do you know where he went after that?"

"Why? Are you trying to hunt him down?"

"He's been out of touch with us for a while. Doctor Felix would like to speak to him again, that's all."

"I don't have a phone number for him, if that's what you're asking."

"So you have no way of contacting him?"

"Not right now... unless you want me to try remote viewing him."

"Could you really do that?"

"Maybe." Gordon shrugged.

Bill Johnson hooked a finger into the collar of his Grateful Dead T-shirt and pulled on it, looking exceedingly uncomfortable. "When you were with Lloyd Marrsden... did he ever tell you anything about, or happen to mention anything about, *uhm*... Andrija Puharich's Star Kids program?"

"What the fuck, Bill?" Gordon snapped, losing his cool. "Why are we even having this stupid conversation if you know about the Star Kids program? All your sly insinuations about how I might be delusional... you know I'm not, asshole."

"I'm sorry. There was no other way. I had to find out how much you know."

"Yeah? Well, maybe I need to find out how much *you* know."

"Okay, fair enough. We'll do this together then. You can start. Ask me any question you want."

"Tell me what you know about Puharich and The Nine."

Bill Johnson's forehead had acquired a greasy, pimped sheen. "To the best of our knowledge," he said, avoiding Gordon's eyes, "Andrija Puharich has been a beneficiary of black budget funding since the early nineteen-fifties, when he was given funds to purchase a sixty-five acre estate in Glen Cove, Maine, where he established a parapsychology laboratory known as the Round Table Foundation. He's an inventor of medical devices with many patents to his credit, but most of his research has focused on psychic powers, trance channeling, and the potential enhancement of those abilities with hallucinogenic mushrooms. He's published some well-regarded books on those subjects."

"I know," said Gordon, pointing across the room to a low bookshelf. "*The Sacred Mushroom* and *Beyond Telepathy*. I've read them."

"Then you should know that Puharich's first encounter with that group entity known as The Nine occurred in 1952, through his association with a trance-channeling Indian sage named Doctor Vinod. Puharich has had many subsequent encounters with The Nine over the years, speaking with them through a variety of trance channelers, often in the company of celebrities and millionaires. He's become obsessed with the idea that The Nine are somehow invisibly directing the course of his life – and the course of

mankind's evolution, as well – but, like you, he's not demonstrably naïve or delusional."

"You know they're listed as members of the Esalen Institute's staff, right?"

"No, I didn't know that." Bill Johnson's gluey white skin turned an even whiter shade of pale. "That's a very disturbing revelation."

"Lloyd told me about it, just before the crash. A few weeks ago I met the woman who channels them. Her name's Jenny O'Connor. The Nine actually hold seminars here, using her as a sort of psychic radio transceiver, if you can believe that."

"Puharich was using them in much the same way to tutor the Star Kids... or perhaps, more accurately, The Nine were using *him*."

"Right... out at the Turkey Ranch in Ossining, New York. Kids with genius-level I.Q.s – and maybe alien genes in their DNA – being trained by Puharich and The Nine in remote viewing... and other stuff."

"It's that 'other stuff' that concerns me. There was a fire in the summer of 1978 that burned the Turkey Ranch to the ground. Puharich accused the CIA of arson and fled to Mexico, fearing for his safety. The Star Kids also went into hiding, scattering around the globe. My assignment, for the past five years, has been to locate them and offer our assistance. There are at least twenty Star Kids that we know of, each with a wide range of psychic abilities – remote viewing being among the least of their talents. Puharich claimed that some of the Star Kids were capable of teleportation. Others could materialize objects at will, like trees. Some of them, we believe, are truly dangerous."

A term rose up, unbidden, within Gordon's mind: *psychic killer*. "What I've never been able to figure out," he said, "is whether Puharich's job was to track down people with genuine psychic abilities and exploit the hell out of them, or if he was somehow using hypnosis to implant mind control scripts that made people *believe* they had psychic abilities – or alien DNA – for some sinister, screwed up CIA purpose."

"I wish I knew the answer to that myself," Bill Johnson said.

"And what if, by making people *believe* they had psychic abilities, some of those people actually ended up developing *real* psychic abilities?"

"Again, I don't know the answer, but I suspect such a thing could be possible. Whenever Uri Geller was shown bending spoons on television, parents would call in to report that their children were likewise mutilating the family silverware with the power of their impressionable young minds."

"Maybe," Gordon speculated, "instead of being just a tool for the CIA, Puharich was prepping us for the next step up the evolutionary ladder, toward a paradigm shift in human consciousness. From *Homo sapiens* to *Homo noeticus*, like they're always saying over at the Institute for Noetic Sciences. And maybe the Agency decided they didn't want that to happen."

Bill Johnson shifted awkwardly in his chair. "I'm sorry, Gordon, but I have to ask you this: Did you take part in the Star Kids program?"

Gordon stared into Bill's yellowish, protuberant eyes for a few moments before slowly shaking his head. "Not that I'm aware of... although Lloyd was pretty convinced I'd been

snagged by a different kind of mind control program, most likely out at the Lemoore Naval Air Station. Sort of a Star Kids, The Sequel – only with a lot more sex and violence this time, thanks to some MKULTRA tricks they picked up along the way. He also thought my friend, Jimmy, might've been through it with me."

"Jimmy... Lloyd's nephew?"

"Yep."

"He never told us that."

"Maybe he doesn't trust you. And maybe I shouldn't, either."

"He says you're capable of remote influencing. Is that true?"

"Lloyd says a lot of stuff. There's no guarantee any of it's true."

"Remote influencing is the Holy Grail of modern mind control programs: the ability to psychically influence the minds and bodies of others... to have your thoughts carry out actions at a distance. If you can do *that*, it's almost a sure bet they've had their way with you."

Gordon's face hardened as he said: "Look, Bill: I've had a slight problem with amnesia since the crash, so I'm not the ultimate authority on any of this crap, but I can tell you right now that I have absolutely no memory of being involved in any black budget mind control programs."

"You wouldn't," Bill Johnson replied. "One of their primary objectives is to erase all conscious memory of the programming through the sophisticated use of the brain's ability to dissociate. They've been deliberately creating dissociated multiple personalities – or 'alters' – in children ever since MKULTRA Subproject 136 was funded in 1961.

Once created, a child's alter personalities can be programmed to respond to post-hypnotic suggestions without the core or 'front' personality being aware of the alters' actions."

Gordon let out a long, aggrieved sigh. "And somewhere along the way they discovered that torture, rape, and electroshock treatments work best for creating those alters, right?"

Bill nodded. "Along with the use of hypnosis and powerful drugs, including hallucinogens. The children in these programs are being traumatized in some of the most extreme ways imaginable. 'Government-sponsored ritual abuse,' we call it. It usually happens in staged settings that incorporate deliberately absurd elements like costumed Satanists, aliens, or even Walt Disney characters, so that if the children should ever recall what their tormentors did to them, their testimony won't be believed."

"Yeah, yeah... Lloyd went over all that with me. No one's going to believe a kid who says he was sodomized by the Pope or Mickey Mouse. I'm not even sure I'd believe it myself."

"Does the name Doctor Smiley mean anything to you?"

Gordon shuddered. "Doctor Smiley was my pediatrician," he said with a look of disgust.

"He was also your handler."

"That's what Lloyd said. But he also said that Doctor Smiley sucked at what he did. If I start to remember what happened during my programming, I'm supposed to have an OMEGA-level alter that will kick in with a fail-safe suicide response, but Doctor Smiley screwed up my programming so bad that I just get a hard-on instead."

"I see you have one now," Bill Johnson observed, nodding with clinical detachment in the direction of Gordon's crotch.

"Yeah... just ignore that," Gordon said, rearranging his legs to conceal the stony erection tenting his trousers. "It's not for you, obviously."

"Duly noted."

Gordon kept talking to conceal his embarrassment: "As a back-up, I was supposed to slip into a coma if the suicide response didn't work. But Lloyd told me Doctor Smiley was such a pedophile horndog that he couldn't even get *that* right. The coma programming got spread around inside my brain and diluted into just an annoying case of narcolepsy. I can't help it... I just drop off to sleep for a few minutes whenever I get too stressed out or startled by a loud noise. Like, I hear a firecracker go off and suddenly I'm facedown and it's lights out."

"That must be inconvenient."

"Let's just say I'll never make a very good tightrope walker."

"A pity. On the other hand, narcolepsy could be quite useful for purposes of remote influencing."

"How so? I don't think I'm following you."

"As I'm sure Lloyd explained to you, remote influencing is a reciprocal phenomenon: whatever you do to your target is also done to you. If you inflict psychic pain on someone, you'll feel that pain yourself. For instance, you can't use remote influencing to cause a fatal heart attack in someone unless you're willing to go into cardiac arrest right along with them."

"Instant karma," Gordon observed. "You're right... Lloyd told me about it. I thought he was just bullshitting me at the

time. He said that since remote influencing operates further up on the astral-material continuum, where aliens and angels come from, its spiritual consequences are more immediate.”

“Yes, but there’s a loophole,” Bill Johnson said. “If you know how to induce a bout of narcolepsy in yourself, you can induce it in your target, as well – and there’s no karmic law against you doing it while you’re sitting in a comfortable chair, for instance, and your target is, say, driving a car at high speed along the cliffs of Big Sur.”

“That’s not how it happened,” said Gordon, remembering.

“Not how what happened?”

“The car crash. Nobody made Lloyd fall asleep at the wheel by using remote influencing. My friends were in the backseat and I was sitting up front with Lloyd and it was me: I was freaking out because Lloyd had just told me that one of my alters had been programmed as a *psychic killer*... and I had a spell of narcolepsy. When I fell asleep, I slumped against Lloyd’s arms, making it hard for him to steer. The Bentley hit a guardrail, but by then Lloyd had already managed to slow us down enough, so we just bounced off it. But when he and Jimmy got out to inspect the damage – ”

Bill Johnson said nothing. He just nervously tapped the heel of his shiny black wingtip shoe.

“I know who you are...” Gordon said.

Quick as a lizard, Bill Johnson pulled a rusty ice pick from the pocket of his black double-knit slacks and lunged off the couch, aiming for Gordon’s eyes – but he was already too late. With a weird jolt of concentration, Gordon gathered up the cloud of narcolepsy that was sweeping over him and psychically shared it with his would-be assassin. Bill

Johnson's gluey white face was pole-axed by sleep in mid-flight. Before he even had the chance to think *Man, where did that come from?* he dropped to the floor like a tie-dyed sack of bones.

Gordon, at that same moment, was overcome by sleep in his wheelchair, but he'd anticipated that. His familiarity with the quirks of narcolepsy would allow him to wake up long before Bill Johnson roused himself from sleep. What he didn't anticipate, however, was what a psychic jolt of remote influencing would do to Bill Johnson's borrowed molecular stability.

While they both slept, an insectile buzzing rose up from the floor, like a hornet's nest humming with malign industry. Bill Johnson's body took on a sickly cyan cast, as if thousands of tiny blue fireflies were crawling beneath his semi-transparent skin. Then, with a light-sucking implosion into nothingness, Bill Johnson's body disappeared.

When Gordon woke up, the only evidence of his visitor from the Scottish Rite Psychophrenic Research Program was a bluish glint of vapor in the air and a whiff of cinnamon and stale cat piss - the ghostly residue of those transdimensional tricksters known to him as the Men in Black.



BOOK ONE

The Third Mind

THE GREATEST ILLUSION IS THAT MANKIND HAS LIMITATIONS.

—ROBERT A. MONROE



KARMACOMA

*Early morning, October 13, 1988
San Simeon, California*

Please allow me to introduce myself: I'm a man of limited wealth and dubious taste. Hope you guess my name.

It's early morning and I'm driving south along the Pacific Coast Highway in a rusty, sun-faded yellow 1973 Jeep Wagoneer. A ghostly tsunami of fog rolls across the beach out the cracked window to my right. The air smells of sea foam, sage, and wet eucalyptus. Surgical scars like old shark tooth imprints run up and down the length of my body - the result of a car accident some five years earlier along this very same highway. I'd been asleep in the passenger seat of a Bentley Corniche convertible when it was rear-ended by a Phantom Black, early-sixties Lincoln Continental. The Bentley went crashing over one of Big Sur's scenic cliffs, taking three of my closest friends and me along with it.

The three friends died.

I've been told that when the Coast Guard's emergency rescue crew found me, the mangled Bentley was almost completely underwater. I was in a coma. I remained in that coma for thirty-three days while my broken bones mended. When I finally woke up, I had no memory of the crash and only scattered intimations of my own identity.

My most vivid memories seemed to take place in the chambers of the sea. It took me quite some time to realize I was a patient at the Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula and not - as I'd mistakenly presumed - a lingering denizen of the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Somehow, while I was comatose, another part of me had decided to go for a long swim in the uncharted waterways of my consciousness. That other part of me (my soul? my subliminal Self?) had no interest in conventional notions of space, time, and causality. It simply didn't care that my body was in a hospital bed and my brain was flatlining.

In what I eventually came to think of as my necronautical nightmares, I'd envisioned myself as a stalwart young walrus swimming through dark waters, busily exploring undersea caverns and the barnacled bones of old shipwrecks. Sometimes a glowing white light accompanied me, like a friendly globe of ball lightning. At other times I was attacked by fanged uglies from the deep. I fought off peyote-green sea snakes that darted in and out of my solar plexus with apparent ease. I encountered a menacing giant squid (peach-colored, with incongruous eagle wings, and an enormous Egyptian-looking eye) that spoke to me in the language of the Old Testament prophets. Each thunderous utterance rang in my water-filled ears. I couldn't translate everything that the Lovecraftian squid wanted to convey, but it had something to do with Melchizedek and certain scurrilous secrets passed down from the sons of Lamech.

And then there was the great white shark - an impossibly huge and vicious sea predator - constantly flaring its gills and snapping its massive jaws at me, forcing me to lurch and dodge out of its way, my walrus nervous system boiling

over with adrenaline. That asshole shark really had it in for me.

It was only later – when memories of my former life in a San Joaquin Valley farm town called Kingsburg started coming back to me, like random scenes from a sublimated movie – that I realized the shark had the same demeanor as my mother.

The Jeep shudders, buffeted by a cold gust of ocean wind that shakes me loose from my reveries. I roll up the driver's side window and see, up ahead, the high white castle on a distant hill that the famed architect, Julia Morgan, dreamed up for William Randolph Hearst. Back when I was still in high school, someone once told me that Hearst and his well-compensated crew of yellow journalists were evil-minded agitators for war – purveyors of jingoism, schadenfreude, and disinformation. I believe that to be true now even more than I did then. I've spent the last five years hanging around the Esalen Institute, getting an education.

A fat man in a bespoke suit made that possible for me.

When I'd finally surfaced from my coma, I found myself in traction. Titanium pins mounted on O-rings encircled my left arm and both legs. The pins were screwed deep into my flesh, holding my shattered bones in place to mend. I wasn't in much pain, but the ever-healing puncture wounds where the pins pierced my skin itched like crazy. Of course, I couldn't scratch. My right arm, like my left, had been immobilized so I wouldn't pull out the intravenous drip.

A nurse looked in on me, summoned by changes in the equipment monitoring my brain wave activity and heart rate. She went away and returned a few minutes later with two older men in dark blue operating room scrubs. They asked me a lot of questions. I wasn't much in the mood for

talking, but I provided what answers I could. My throat was dry and hoarse from disuse. They gave me some water to sip from a blue plastic Dixie cup. After a while, I was left alone again. I passed several hours – if not days – doing nothing more than wallowing in my abjection, napping, revisiting my aqueous dreams. Then the fat man in the expensive suit walked in.

He had squinty eyes and a beet-red face with a broken-veined nose. Even the bespoke suit couldn't hide the fact that he was morbidly obese. He claimed to be Lloyd Marrsden, the uncle of my childhood best friend, Jimmy Marrsden. I didn't recognize him. I couldn't remember who the hell Jimmy was, either – but I was lonely and bored, so I asked Lloyd to tell me more.

Lloyd explained that he was the owner of the Bentley in which I'd been sleeping when it had been rear-ended and sent crashing over the cliff by a Phantom Black Lincoln. ("Phantom Black" – not just black – I still remember that phrase distinctly.) Lloyd and Jimmy, apparently, had been standing in the road only a few yards away when the incident occurred. Immediately following the collision, the sinister men in the black Lincoln took the two of them hostage. ("Men in Black" Lloyd called them.) Somehow, extraterrestrials were involved. Somehow, Lloyd and Jimmy had escaped. It was all very confusing. But I'd only recently emerged from thirty-three days of surreal underwater escapades, so my vestigial walrus-self said, "Okay, big man... whatever."

"I'll explain more when you're fully recovered," Lloyd promised me. Then he popped the locks on a brushed aluminum Zero Halliburton briefcase and took out a stack of documents.

It turned out I was a partner in a limited liability company that held life insurance policies on two of the three friends who had died in the crash. Jimmy and I were the designated beneficiaries of those policies – as was Lloyd, who conveyed that information with a sort of grimacing, forced solemnity as he shuffled through the papers. The death benefits amounted to one million dollars – split three ways.

So now I had a \$333,333 to spend – which seemed like a lot, until Lloyd told me it wasn't. There were taxes to be paid and my medical expenses weren't being covered by a health insurance plan. However, if I would allow Lloyd to invest the bulk of the money on my behalf, he promised it would easily pay for my physical rehabilitation and four years of college – or a room at the Esalen Institute for several years with an all-access pass to lectures and workshops, which to Lloyd's way of thinking was infinitely preferable. All I had to do was sign a few documents to claim the benefits and give Lloyd power-of-attorney.

Feeling reckless and feckless, I did a quick scan of the documents and then signed away. In doing so, I rediscovered my own name:

Gordon Swannson.

"Crash Gordon to your friends," Lloyd informed me, adding carelessly: "That nickname of yours is now very apropos."

Ho-ho.

Lloyd, over the years, has made good on his promise. Every month, I get a statement from my brokerage firm showing the upward trend in my portfolio's investment value roughly keeping pace with my modest expenses. I'm nowhere close to being rich, but Lloyd has shown near-

faultless judgment buying call options on Microsoft stock in small amounts. Even more impressive, he bought puts and sold naked calls against the S&P 500 only a week before the Black Monday stock market meltdown during the previous year – upping the portfolio’s value by a cool thirty grand. Those trades are now the only proof of his existence. I’ve neither seen nor heard from Lloyd since that first meeting in the hospital.

My fairy-fucking-godfather is how I’ve come to think of him.

I make a right turn onto San Simeon Road, driving the Jeep – packed full of my belongings – toward the adobe warehouses where Hearst once stashed his incoming loot. The driftwood-strewn beach of San Simeon Cove lies behind the buildings, partially obscured by a cyclone fence. Through patches of foggy sky, I can see pelicans dive-bombing for their breakfast out beyond the breakers. Their honking cries make me glad to be alive.

I park under the eaves of a rundown general store and get out. The wooden front porch of the store is weather-stained and worn smooth from the hands and feet of countless tourists. Two hand-carved signs made from cedar planks with white lettering read simply: Sebastian’s/1852. I go in through a swinging door with a rusty Coca-Cola sign tacked to the lower panel. The unvarnished floorboards creak and groan under my feet. The swinging door slaps on its spring behind me.

As my eyes adjust to the dimness, I see an old-fashioned glass-top freezer chest full of ice cream bars and Fudgsicles. Behind it is a tabletop display of cheese rounds, freshly baked pies, and local produce. Old oak barrels filled with rock candy and jawbreakers line the aisles. Fishing

rods and a disintegrating birch bark canoe are stashed up in the rafters.

The back of the store has a tar-blackened log cabin wall dominated by a large post office window casting a dusky amber glow. From my perspective, it looks like a Natural History Museum diorama where Smokey the Bear might be found taxidermied in mid-gesture, filing paperwork to complete his bureaucratic obligations to the U.S. Forestry Service.

I buy an apple and get the hell out of there.

I'm feeling a little freaked out. The store's interior reminded me of something Lloyd had told me, only a few hours before the accident, about aliens doing construction work under gigantic football stadium lights on the far side of the Moon. That conversation had taken place just before we'd entered a similar general store approximately thirty miles east of Paso Robles, on the road where James Dean had met his death in a speeding Porsche Spyder. It was the dawning of my realization that Lloyd had deep and scary ties to the black budget programs of the medico-military-occult complex – which was like the military-industrial complex President Eisenhower had warned the American people about back in 1961, only weirder and far more sinister.

But was any of that stuff real?

Ever since the accident, I've had an uneasy relationship with my returning memory. I have no way of knowing if anything I recall actually happened. I've never been back to the town I grew up in, nor spoken to anyone – aside from Lloyd – who knew me before I went over the cliff. From what I remember, my father died in a plane crash when I was ten, or twelve, and my mother wasn't the sort of person

who would ever come looking for me. My mother, in fact, is the reason I've stayed away from Kingsburg. But what if my memories of her are fabrications? What if they're just stories my traumatized mind made up to avoid confronting the terrifying existential nothingness of amnesia?

Ultimately, my memories were so convincing in their portrayal of my mother as a shark-faced bitch that I decided I didn't want to risk finding out if they were true. Perhaps that was cowardly on my part, but how often does a person from a dysfunctional family get a chance for a completely fresh start? My friends were dead. My old life seemed, from my recollections, exceedingly unpleasant. I chose the blank slate: a new life.

Across the road from where I've parked the Jeep, there's a barbed wire fence with a rutted dirt trail beyond it. The trail leads up a steep slope to a stand of eucalyptus trees on a red clay bluff overlooking San Simeon Cove. Ignoring a *No Trespassing* sign, I climb over the fence. I've been planning this visit for a while now. It's monarch butterfly season. The monarchs have chosen this particular eucalyptus grove as an overwintering stop at the end of their southward migration route – and I want to see them.

I pass a rusting hulk of something resembling a chain-driven gold-mining sluice, sunk in the tall foxtails. Already, as I head up the slope, I can see the monarchs' beautiful orange wings fluttering through the air and clustering in long curtains on the fragrant eucalyptus branches. I used to think their brilliant hues were for purposes of sexual attraction – advertisements for themselves. Now I know better. The orange is a warning coloration, signaling to predators that monarchs are poisonous.

In the long months of physical therapy after I'd been discharged from the hospital, my memories came fluttering back to me much like the arriving monarchs. A mental image of a face would flit out from the fog of my forgotten history. Then a name would come stuttering after it. Jimmy's face, for one, came back to me that way: all freckles, red ears, belligerent eyes, and unruly brown hair. The years overlapped and I simultaneously saw Jimmy as a snarky teenager (drunk at a loud party, projectile vomiting a geyser of rum and partially-digested Top Ramen noodles into his uncle's Tang Dynasty vase), and as a six-year-old in short pants (bouncing on a hospital bed outside the condensation-clouded confines of my oxygen tent). That vision led, in turn, to memories of the many times I'd been hospitalized in my youth, which led to memories of a jolly, bow-tie-wearing buffoon named Dr. Smiley... and so the memories accumulated, the branching pathways of my brain's neurons becoming active again, like the long curtains of clustering monarchs on the eucalyptus branches just beyond my reach.

My rehabilitation had been so tedious and grueling that at times I felt certain I was dead and just hadn't been told about it yet. My snarky Argentinean physical therapist, Ramon, could have been a daimonic taskmaster in purgatory – the suffering he inflicted, a penance for past sins. Later, I came up with the basically useless idea that I was still in a coma and everything that had happened to me since I “woke up” had been a sort of dream or hallucination from within the coma. But if I couldn't differentiate between dreaming and waking, then the person in the coma who was hallucinating the whole show could be a vastly different person from the person I thought I was – a different age, a different gender, living in a different past or future.

In fact, if the entire world, with me in it, was just a *holomovement* – a three-dimensional holographic projection progressing in linear time (Lloyd had long ago familiarized me with that term) – then I could be anything that could receive and project the holomovement's signal. I didn't even have to be human. For all I knew, I could be a bundle of neural DNA being kept alive somewhere in a vat of amniotic fluid. Or my consciousness could be encoded on a silicon chip inside a computer.

Fun to think about, but useless as a theory for practical action, because if I'm locked into an endless, all-encompassing, infinitely detailed dream from which there will be no immediate awakening, then I have no choice but to just ride it out. So what if reality is a kind of vast Borgesian riddle or metaphysical fiction? Who cares if it's all *Maya* – an illusion? Best to get on with the business of living.

To that end, I'd taken up residence at Esalen.

Esalen had been the easy choice. Everything had already been arranged for me. A man named Richard Price contacted me through the hospital and told me there was a cabin near the Institute available to me for as long as I wanted to stay there. It was the same cabin the folksinger Joan Baez had once called home back in the early sixties – around the time she'd been romantically linked with Bob Dylan. I thought that sounded auspicious. I didn't question why Lloyd and the man from Esalen were so eager to help me.

I moved in during the first week of December. It took me a while to get acclimated. There were too many introductions and my memory still wasn't up to speed – names went in one ear and out the other. But within a few days I felt ready

to attend my first seminar. The Esalen Institute happened to be hosting something called the Lilly/Goswami Conference on Consciousness and Quantum Physics. Terence McKenna was giving a lecture in the Big House, which was situated on a cypress-covered hill across a creek from the rest of the property, with a stunning view of the Pacific. I found my way to a folding chair and sat down in the back row.

Terence McKenna turned out to be a bearded, skinny guy with an ultra-intense stare that seemed to transmit high-frequency intelligence on carrier waves of boundless human warmth. As soon as he started speaking, I felt an instant connection with him – a soaring sensation of *déjà vu* – as if we'd been friends in a previous world.

McKenna talked about how tryptophan-derived hallucinogens like psilocybin, DMT, and *ayahuasca* work on a quantum mechanical level, how Sasha Shulgin and others had demonstrated that moving one atom on the molecular ring of an inactive compound could cause that compound to become highly hallucinogenic. What drew McKenna to the tryptamine family of compounds in particular was the intensity of the hallucinations and the weird interior dialogue they invoked. That dialogue often came across as an articulate alien voice inside his head. Without making judgments about it, he called it the Logos.

He described the Logos as an ever-present channel of cosmic communication that operates non-locally throughout the entire universe, unimpeded by conventional boundaries of time and space. Tryptamine hallucinogens provide access to it. To illustrate, McKenna explained that thirty seconds after he'd smoked DMT for the first time in 1966, he found himself in an eerie underground cavern where he was met by a crew of fractally-morphing machine elves that spoke to

him in a kind of alien assembly language. Their words instantaneously passed from things heard into things seen. They advised him to curb his astonishment: "Don't get a loop of wonder going that quenches your ability to understand." But McKenna was not only astonished – he was appalled. His ontological take on reality was being blown. As he put it:

"There was a declension of gnosis that proved to me in a moment that right here and now, one quanta away, there is raging a universe of active intelligence that is transhuman, hyperdimensional, and extremely alien."

Later in the lecture, McKenna postulated that since the organic material covering mushroom spores is hard enough to survive space travel, psilocybin mushrooms might have originated outside our solar system. They might actually *be* aliens – just not aliens of the type described in *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells. But by then I was hardly paying attention. I was remembering, for the first time, why my friends and I had been riding in Lloyd's Bentley:

We'd been on a journey to Esalen.

Along the way, Lloyd had been lecturing us about hypnotism, assassination theories, and the CIA-sponsored remote viewing program at the Stanford Research Institute. He'd also had quite a bit to say about interdimensional energy portals, UFOs, shamanism, and his friend Terence McKenna's tryptamine-inspired encounters with the Logos. And he'd gone on and on about the black-budget-funded experiments of a scientist named Andrija Puharich, who'd been working with a psychically-gifted group of children called the Star Kids while being supervised by a trance-channeled group of extraterrestrials called The Nine. It was the most hair-raisingly strange, yet

somehow believable story that any of us had ever heard – and it was all just a prelude to explaining how Jimmy and I had become unwitting stooges in a black budget CIA mind control project.

A deprogrammer at Esalen named Dr. Rob Felix was supposed to help us, but the trip had gotten sidetracked when Lloyd admitted that The Nine were listed on the Esalen Institute's staff. Suddenly, no one knew if Lloyd could be trusted. Then, as if to confirm the great peril we were in, the Bentley had been rammed from behind by the Phantom Black Lincoln.

It's five years later and I can remember it all now as if it happened only yesterday, yet I'm reminded that there are still some areas where my memory remains occluded. Standing under the eucalyptus trees with their long curls of peeling bark, surrounded by monarchs, I still can't recall anything that was done to me in that CIA mind control project. I only know I took part in it. My unusual psychic abilities – or *siddhis* – are proof enough of my participation. They were a source of great fascination at Esalen and the reason I was allowed to stay there for so long, as the resident psychic guinea pig.

In a way, I guess I owe the CIA a debt of gratitude, but I suspect they took something precious from me as well – I just can't remember what. The only thing I remember is the project's purported name:

Project MONARCH.

SO LONG, ESALEN
(AND THANKS FOR ALL THE BLISS)

“You’re tuned to KOTR - *K-Otter* - wet ‘n’ furry radio for the Central Coast. I’m your host, A.C. Nightshade, filling in for Harry P. this morning, who’s out getting some painkillers for his sprained iguana.... That’s, um, what’s known as a euphemism, for all you kids out there. Harry had a hot date last night and right now he’s hung-over as hell. He may be half-bald, pushing sixty, and suffering from chronic depression, but the man knows how to party.

“Up next, the Psychedelic Furs with ‘Love My Way’.”

There’s something instantly familiar about that voice on the radio. I’m sitting in a red leatherette booth under a movie poster for *Citizen Kane* in a smoky, run-down diner called the Cambria Pines Bar and Grill – just a few miles south of San Simeon in the quaint little seaside town of Cambria, California. The portable radio I’m listening to sits on a shelf behind the diner’s stool-lined Formica counter beneath a glossy framed photo of two longhaired sweaty men singing into a microphone. I’ve never met anyone named A.C. Nightshade before, but I know that DJ from somewhere – I’m sure of it.

Then it dawns on me: it’s my old friend and partner in juvenile crime, Jimmy Marrsden.

Holy shit!

I keep eating my post-monarchs breakfast of sourdough pancakes and iced peppermint tea while I think of Jimmy: Jimmy, who'd once tried to kill me by dropping me out of a tree house when we were both seven years old; Jimmy, that relentless wise-ass and carefree projectile-vomiter; Jimmy, who through some weird quirk of childhood kismet had somehow ended up as my best pal.

A fat lady psychic in a rumored whorehouse had once perfectly summed him up by saying: "You take pride in being the smirker, the mocking one. You seek to do evil, but your evil almost always turns out for the good."

I need to find him, I decide, even though I'll probably regret it later.

There's a friendly-looking fry cook behind the counter wearing a grease-spattered chef's apron and a green Oakland A's baseball cap. He's standing by the radio, fiddling with a cappuccino machine. I go over and ask him if he knows where the radio station broadcasts from. "I think I might know the DJ," I tell him.

"You know James, sir?" the fry cook asks with odd formality, considering the setting.

"He's calling himself *James* now? James Marrsden?"

"Yes, sir! James visits us quite frequently. He smokes up a storm, drinks coffee by the gallon, and he likes to make off-color jokes."

"He uses the word *pussified* a lot, right?"

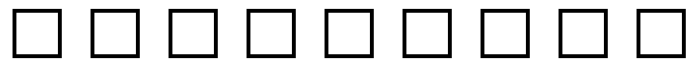
"That would be James. I find him droll, but other people seem to think he's ill-mannered."

"That's putting it kindly. I used to be his best friend, but I wouldn't hesitate to call him an asshole."

The fry cook grins. “That radio station you’re looking for doesn’t own enough megawatts to broadcast very far. It’s right out in back, just around the corner. Look for the wooden sea otter dry-humping a mailbox. You can’t miss it.”

Wow, that was way too easy... I think to myself. It makes me wonder: was finding Jimmy just a coincidence, or was the fry cook part of a mind-fucking conspiracy masquerading as the fickle finger of fate? There’s no way of telling. But one thing’s for certain: Jimmy “James” Marrsden is my best chance at finding out whether the memories of my life before the accident contain any truth whatsoever.

So I thank the fry cook and pay for my meal, leaving a large tip. Then I go off to find my old friend... or nemesis – I’m not really sure which.



The otter-violated mailbox stands in front of a small Tudor house with an assortment of Frisbees and hula-hoops scattered across the front lawn in vivid plastic circles of bubble gum pink and robin’s egg blue. Closer to the gravel path leading up to the front porch, a severed doll’s head lies in the weeds next to a wooden croquet mallet. I walk up to the door and knock. Someone yells for me to come in.

The radio station’s receptionist – if she can be called that – slouches in a black vinyl beanbag chair in the middle of an avocado green shag-carpeted room that smells strongly of old bong water and spilt beer. She’s young, not much older than sixteen, with a pimply face and long, dirty blonde hair. She’s wearing cut-off jeans and a faded gray Joy Division T-shirt. No bra. In her lap, a pink Princess phone with a Sex

Pistols decal on it sits connected to a long extension cord. The latest issue of *Creem* is draped open across her skinny knees.

The room's scuffed plaster walls are covered with psychedelic rock posters and concert flyers. At a glance, I register the Grateful Dead, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, Canned Heat, Bob Dylan, Pink Floyd, The Clash, and, incongruously, a tripped-out Bugs Bunny playing air guitar on a giant carrot while a diminutive Marvin the Martian glares at him from under a green, brush-topped Roman warrior helmet.

"Can I help you?" the girl asks.

"Yeah... I'm, uh, looking for James Marrsden?" It's more of a question than a statement. I'm still not sure that reintroducing myself to James is such a wise idea.

"He's on the air, but the door's open, so just go on in. Try not to make any noise, though." The girl motions toward the hallway at the back of the room and picks up her magazine. Nothing more needs to be said, apparently.

I head down the hallway until I find a doorway with a bare red light bulb above it, lit up over the words: **ON THE AIR**. Just past the partially open door, I can see the back of a tall man in jeans and a red flannel shirt clutching a pair of bright yellow headphones to his ears as he does a spastic dance to the accompaniment of The Police's first hit single, "Roxanne."

The music in the broadcasting room is up, loud, and as the dancing figure twists around to reveal his bearded face, he lets loose with a comically off-key wail that resounds through the studio monitors - and thus through every radio in town that's tuned to the station:

“ROOXXX-ANNE!” It’s like a little old Haitian lady performing a voodoo summoning.

Definitely Jimmy.... Taking a deep breath, I go through the doorway and give a silent wave to the last person I saw before I was pushed off a cliff.



“So the truth is, you were a male prostitute,” James says with effusive mendacity. “A truck stop whore with a really bad addiction to *bufotenine*, which is some kind of crazy, smokable hallucinogen that meth labs make on the side from the venom of Colorado River Toads. Which explains a lot, am I right? Anyway... to support your filthy habit, you’d sell yourself to any lonesome old trucker who came down the road – for the bargain basement price of only thirty bucks.”

“Man, I don’t remember any of that,” I say, feigning credulity. James is seated next to me at the bar in Old Camozzi’s Saloon. We’re working on our third round of beers and it isn’t even time for lunch yet.

“I used to get so sad when I’d see you in your rhinestone hot pants, peddling your ass down at the Pink Elephant Car Wash.”

James is almost exactly as I remember him, aside from the scruffy new beard and mustache – which lends a dash of manly ruggedness to his childish, freckled face.

“Y’know, now that I think about it,” I say, playing along, “I seem to recall a nurse saying they had to cut me out of a gold lamé tube top with a lot of splooge marks on it right

after they pulled me from the wreckage of your uncle's Bentley."

James snorts out a laugh. "Dude, I'm just fuckin' with you. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, James, I know. Just like the old days."

"Everything you asked me about earlier is true. Your memory's not that bad at all. In some places, it's even better than mine."

"So my mother really *did* have a violent temper, huh?"

"Oh man, she was the worst - a total shrieking bitch! I mean, Jesus... your dad or your nude-dude uncle should've stomped her into the ground a long time ago."

"Wait a sec... who's my 'nude-dude' uncle?"

"You're kidding! You don't remember?" James does a good job of appearing incredulous. If he's lying again, he's a great actor. "Your mom started getting it on with your dad's brother right after your dad died in the plane crash. Then he moved in with her and they both became nudists!"

"I didn't know that." Even with two-and-a-half pints of Guinness in me, I still feel a bit shaken by the discovery of another huge gap in my memory. "I must've lost a big chunk of my brain somewhere when I went over that cliff," I mutter, although my doctors had concluded otherwise during my hospital stay. No serious structural damage had been done to my brain, they told me. Mine was a case of psychogenic amnesia, or Dissociative Fugue - or so they claimed.

"I can't believe you don't remember that! Man, you were like Hamlet!" James cackles. "Seeing your uncle dangle his dong in front of you in your own house used to make you melancholy as fuck."

According to Freud, psychogenic amnesia is a sneaky act of self-preservation – an alternative to suicide. “Since when did you start reading Shakespeare?” I ask James, feeling surly.

“Dude, I already told you: I marinated my brain at Yale for almost three whole semesters before they finally kicked me out. Why should it surprise you that I’ve read *Hamlet* – at least in translation? I was a goddam scholar!”

“I still can’t believe you got into Yale with your pathetic grades. Did you have to bribe someone, or what?”

“Lloyd pulled a few strings. Just like he did for you when he set you up at Esalen.”

“Well, all right then.” I hoist my nearly empty glass. “Here’s to Uncle Lloyd, our fairy-fucking-godfather....”

“Hear! Hear!”

“And here’s to dead friends.”

“Twinker, D.H., and Skip.... Let’s hope they’re having a blast in heaven – or wherever.”

I down the rest of my beer and request another round from the ancient, vaguely mechanical-looking lady bartender. Then I ask James what Lloyd has been up to lately.

“I honestly don’t have a clue,” says James. “The fat bastard hasn’t been around for a while. He’s off somewhere in Spook City again. He was talking a lot about that Iran-Contra deal just before he left.”

“Hey, that reminds me...” I say, trying to sound casual, “did you ever find out anything more about that CIA mind control program that Lloyd told us we’d been suckered into as kids?”

"The one that was supposed to turn us into zombie assassins: Project MONARCH? No, I'm still totally in the dark about that one, just like you. I kind of think he might've been making it up - although you should see me shooting rats out at the Santa Rosa Creek dump with my .357 Magnum. Damn, I'm good. I hardly ever miss. I even plugged a great big honkin' barn owl out there the other day."

"An owl?" I'm semi-outraged, without really knowing why. I weirdly associate owls with extraterrestrials, but that thought goes flitting through my mind so fast that it barely registers. "Man, why would you even *do* that?"

"Who cares - except for the owl? And if the owl doesn't like it, well... tough titty."

"Isn't shooting an owl supposed to be bad luck? I thought the Native Americans believed that if you see an owl in daylight, it means you'll be dead soon."

"Not if you shoot the fucker before it gets away," says James. "Dude, you should've seen the way that owl blew up. It was so cool! It was like a hand grenade going off inside a king-size down pillow."

"Maybe you really *were* trained as an assassin, if you're heartless enough to go around blowing the crap out of cute little woodland creatures like owls with a .357 Magnum."

"Get real," says James. "Owls are assholes. Have you ever seen one take a dump on your car? It happens all the time around here - and it's fucking hideous. They're like Doberman pinschers with wings."

Something about the word *hideous* sparks a vague memory for me. A name is on the tip of my tongue. An image to go along with it seems to be on the verge of taking

shape in my brain, but it just won't resolve. I take a moment to look around the saloon, hoping for a clue, or another association.

There's a bemused-looking moose head mounted on the wall above the pinball machine in the corner. At the edge of the blazing white brightness from the open doorway stands a chainsaw-carved cigar store Indian with a hatchet nose and a feather headdress. The soot-darkened walls are covered with old newspaper clippings in cheap wooden frames, along with fading photographs of bearded men in overalls loafing around in front of gigantic fallen trees, or proudly hoisting record-breaking fish. In back, near the restrooms, there's a low stage equipped with a marimba, a set of bongo drums, and an old-fashioned radio announcer's microphone on a chrome stand. It all seems a little tacky, but nothing adheres to the word *hideous*, exactly.

"Why is the word *hideous* reminding me of something else?" I ask James.

"You must be thinking of our old buddy, Hideo 'Hideous' Nakamatsu," James answers without hesitating.

"Oh shit! You're right!" I nearly yelp as memories of Hideous come back to me in a blurry torrent.

"He's still in Kingsburg," James fills in. "Hideous took over his old man's kiwi orchards and added some acreage of his own. It's working out pretty well for him. He's still driving around in that same snot-green Dodge Ramcharger that he had in high school, but he could probably afford a new Mercedes or a Range Rover by now, if he wanted."

A few details leap out from my sudden recapitulation of all things Hideous: a chrome nose ring, a studded leather dog collar, and spiky, asymmetrical blonde-and-black hair.

Hideous was a punk rocker. I remember the first time Hideous got a contact high, thanks to Jimmy and Skip toking up inside the cab of his truck – how Hideous had subsequently pulled off the road to challenge them both to a giggly kung fu fight. And there was another time, way up in the high school gym bleachers during a pep rally, when D.H. and Skip tried to convince Hideous to take his punk rock aesthetics to a new extreme by boring a hole in the front of his skull, so he'd be able to see the otherwise invisible electromagnetic entities swimming around in the sky, which they referred to as –

“– Orgone Monsters. Remember that?”

“God dang it, Hideous, you have to bore a hole in your skull so you can see the orgone monsters and tell us what they're up to!” James quotes, mimicking D.H.'s manic desperation. He laughs as he tilts back his glass for another drink, spilling a dollop of beer foam down his chin and onto the front of his red flannel shirt.

“I especially liked their theory that the accidental inhalation of baby orgone monsters was the primary cause of spontaneous human combustion.”

The bartender sets two fresh pints of Guinness in front of us. “Thanks, Mavis,” says James, raising his new glass. “Here's to orgone monsters!”

“To orgone monsters!” I second, drinking deeply.

“I've got a little buzz going. How 'bout you?”

“I'm feeling no pain, that's for sure.”

James lights up a cigarette and blows smoke out both nostrils like an angry bull. “So lay it on me, dude: Did you learn anything new about orgone monsters while you were

hanging out with all those flaky bliss-bunnies up at Esalen? Were there classes in, like, Orgone Monsters 101?"

"To tell you the truth, I went to some seminars on topics that were even weirder," I admit. "And by the time I was getting ready to leave, I was even giving lectures in a few of them myself."

"You gave lectures!" James is acting incredulous again. "No shit? What's your degree in: Advanced Metaphysical Bullshit?"

"Actually, I have a Ph.D. in Blowing Smoke Up the Collective Ass of Humanity," I answer coolly.

"Man, you must've scored a ton of pussy. All those gullible little New Age chicks passing through there - dreaming about dolphins and the Gaia hypothesis - they must've been so impressed."

"The braless quantum physicists were more my type. I tend to go for women with a deeper understanding of the universe."

"I guess you don't mind saggy tits."

"On the quantum level, James, we're all just organized clouds of atoms whizzing around in almost entirely empty space. Going even deeper, to the level of quarks and muons, we're nothing but insubstantial and unpredictable quantum wavicles - or vibrations - flitting in and out of existence. Some quantum theorists have even gone so far as to suggest that our subatomic underpinnings could be influenced by the consciousness of an observer. In other words, thought and intention may be a form of energy that can subatomically shape our shared perceptual reality. Consciousness may even precede matter and be the ordering principle of the wave pattern out of which our co-

created, illusory 3-D universe arises. So, to answer your question: 'No... a little sagginess here or there doesn't bother me.'

"Did I just hear you say you could make some old hag's boobs perk up with the powers of your mind?"

"Oh, absolutely...."

James narrows his eyes and takes a meditative sip of beer. "What about those famous Esalen hot tubs they have out there on the cliffs? I'll bet you banged a lot of rich, nympho lady shamans in 'em, right? God, those trippy bitches must fuck like panthers."

I can't help laughing. "James, why the hell are we talking so much about my sex life?" I ask him.

"What - you got a problem with that?" He pats me on the back. "You don't have to bullshit me, Crash. It's okay if you're still a virgin."

I flash on the twenty or thirty women that I had sex with while I was at Esalen - every one of them beautiful, intelligent, and hosting a whole slew of charming, neurotic quirks.

"I'm not a virgin," I say. "Believe me, Esalen still has a lot of that Free Love hippie vibe going on... sort of an 'I'm okay, you're okay, let's fuck' ethos. Getting laid was never a problem." The problem, I explain, was that I'd been unable to find a lasting, loving relationship. Almost every woman I'd met at Esalen had been only passing through. And I had to admit there was something not quite right with me. I felt ill at ease when eating in the company of beautiful women. Some of them had complained that I often lapsed into geekish silences and seemed to be scrutinizing them. My

gaze was too intense, or I was thinking too hard, or something. Whatever it was, it was off-putting.

"Still, it sounds like you had a pretty good thing going on there."

"It had its moments."

"So why'd you leave?"

"Honestly? I was starting to feel a little too isolated."

James lets loose with a facetious sob and grabs me in a bear hug. "I missed you, too, man!"

"That's not what I meant," I say, struggling for breath.

James lets me go. "So what *did* you mean, then?"

"It's kind of hard to explain," I say, taking another gulp of beer. "I guess I was lonely... and a lot of the time I felt like a freak. As part of my deal at Esalen, I had to show off my psychic abilities every now and then. Which meant I had to go off by myself for long stretches of time so I could fast and meditate, because that's the only way I can pull that stuff off."

"So you couldn't, like, telepathically make that hot chick's nipples stand up right now?" James points toward the other end of the nearly empty saloon, where a sultry-looking platinum blonde with a Louise Brooks bobbed haircut sits on a stool next to a much older, silver-haired woman writing things down in a skinny reporter's notebook. "And that's because you've been talking to me and drinking beer?"

"Right."

"Otherwise, you could." James is leering like a voyeur at an orgy. The blonde is wearing a skin-tight pink Lycra halter-top and a white cotton peasant skirt. She looks like she could be a model or an actress.

“Sometimes I could. A lot of times it’s hit-or-miss.”

“Then what good is it to have super-secret-special ‘psychic powers,’ if you can’t even get some babe’s nipples hard? Goddamit, Gordon, answer me that!”

“Hey, don’t ask me. I could never decide if it’s a blessing or a burden to have weak-ass ‘psychic powers.’ Every time I had to perform at Esalen in front of a new crowd, I felt like committing *seppuku* out of sheer embarrassment. It was like putting on a white cape and jumping out of a birthday cake with my hard-on wagging. And half the time the demonstrations didn’t even work – which *really* sucked.”

“What kind of demonstrations are we talking about?”

“Mostly just remote viewing with a little telepathy and precog stuff thrown in. On a good day, I could also do remote influencing with some minor t-k and mind-sharing.”

“What the fuck’s precog and t-k, Mister Hippie-Wizard?”

“Precognition and telekinesis. In my case, telekinesis usually just meant knocking over a house of cards inside a vacuum-sealed bell jar.”

“You could do that by tapping on the glass.”

“I wasn’t anywhere near the glass. It was action at a distance. When I was really on, I could do it from ten or fifteen feet away.”

“You could still make the cards fall over from vibrations in the floor. That just sounds like some crummy staged magic trick to me.”

“Pretty much everything I’ve ever done comes off like a crummy magic trick,” I say. “That’s why I decided to stop doing it.”

Perhaps thinking of the narcissistic thrill he gets from being a radio DJ, James asks me, "Did you at least enjoy giving the lectures?"

"Yeah, actually, I did..." I admit with a shy smile. "I mean, I was self-conscious as hell while I was up there doing it, but at least I felt like I was imparting some useful information. I worked really hard on those lectures. I spent a lot of time writing them."

"Do one for me. Right now."

"You mean here, in the bar?"

"Yeah. Over there," says James, pointing to the low stage. "Look: they've already got a microphone all set up for you."

"No way," I say, chugging the rest of my beer. I'll need to be drunk if I'm even going to consider it.

"C'mon... don't act all pussified. I'll go up there with you and play the bongos, if you want. I do shit like that all the time in here," James assures me. "It brings in more customers."

"No fucking way, James. Nobody'd want to hear me talk, anyway."

"Hey, Mavis!" James shouts to the stiffly-moving bartender, who's shuffling a gin and tonic over to the silver-haired woman at the other end of the bar. "My friend here wants to give us a spoken word performance. Tell him it's okay."

Mavis waves her hand like the animatronic Abe Lincoln at Disneyland. In a voice laced with nicotine and disdain, she croaks, "It's okay by me. Knock yourselves out."

"See?" says James, sounding seven years old again. "Told you."

AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL

A few hours later, I find myself standing on the stage in Old Camozzi's Saloon in a sort of beer-induced trance. I tap the microphone, eliciting a fuzzy *whump-whump* from the P.A. system. The Stones' woozy "Let It Loose," from the *Exile on Main St.* album, is just starting up on the jukebox beside the bar. Still nervous, despite the gallon or so of Guinness in me, I lean forward and say, "My long-lost friend here - "

Startled by the loud, echoing concussion of my amplified voice, I stagger back from the microphone, penguin-flapping my arm at James on the bongos. I can feel blossoms of flop-sweat moistly bursting on my forehead, but I steady myself and begin again:

"As I was saying... my friend James here suggested I give an impromptu lecture - sort of a karaoke round for the metaphysics nerds in the room."

"*Whoo-hoo!*" yells the blonde in the pink halter-top. She's not the first person I would have tagged as having a dorky passion for metaphysics, but I love her right at that moment for her enthusiasm. I settle in, no longer quite so spooked by the sound of my own words.

"I presented this lecture for the first time at the Esalen Institute last summer, during the Pagels/Bohm Symposium on Gnosticism and the Implicate Order. I don't have my notes with me, so this may come out sounding a little rough. But since I expect to be either ignored or gravely

misunderstood – regardless of how much eloquence I can muster – I’ll be accompanied by James Marrsden on bongos and by the morose marimba stylings of Mister Warren Talcott. Let’s give ‘em both a big round of applause!”

The dozen or so paying customers in the saloon tepidly clap their hands as I turn and give a jaunty wave to a frail but determined-looking old man I met just a few minutes earlier, who’s standing behind the marimba wearing a brown leather cowboy hat and a matching leather duster. Warren Talcott tips back his hat to reveal a set of raccoon eyes and a freakishly black, close-cropped Old Hollywood mustache that makes him look like a dissipated Clark Gable. As he bops the marimba’s rosewood bars with the ball-tipped mallets, it soon becomes apparent that Warren has no musical instincts whatsoever – but he has a very large wine glass filled with Pinot Gris and ice chips on the stool beside him, so he’s game for just about anything.

“Dancing,” I suavely slur, “is encouraged.”

With Warren plonking away arrhythmically on the marimba, I announce: “The title of this evening’s lecture is – ”

As prearranged, James cuts in with a perfect imitation of Darth Vader’s mask-muffled *basso profundo* to thunder:

“Galactic Loosh Farming and Reaganomics: How Much Longer Before the Fabric of Reality is Ripped to Shreds?!”

“Hammer it, Jim,” I say as James lets loose with a flurry of bongo drumming to underscore the lecture’s title. It sounds like a heavy-metal drummer flipping out on *iboga* at a tribal ceremony.

When the bongo drumming fades, I lean in close to the mic and start off by saying: “We live in a fallen world. That

should be obvious to just about everyone by now. Ronald Reagan's Technicolor Presidency has gone two trillion dollars over budget and tripled the national debt. 'Trickle-down Economics' has been revealed as just a political scam that forces middle-class taxpayers to throw lavish potlatch parties for the obscenely rich, where all the trust-fund-succored elitist assholes and their psychopathic profit-taking CEO pals get together to guzzle buckets of free champagne so they can rain down their acidic piss on the poor and burn gaping holes in their social safety nets."

I have to pause to catch my breath after that last, lengthy sentence. James fills in the silence with some soulful beatnik bongo thumping.

"You have to love the irony," I continue, "the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and Reagan is hailed as The Great Communicator - a champion of the common folk. The net amount of suffering in the world under Reagan's watch has been increased and it seems deliberate, as if suffering is something to be desired - something to be *feasted* upon. But who eats the suffering? Ron and Nancy? Goldman Sachs? Alan Greenspan and a bunch of interdimensional reptile people skulking around the Pentagon and the Federal Reserve?"

"Suffering tastes delicious once you get past the crust of dried blood to the soft, creamy, squealing center," James interjects. I grin and flip him off.

"So who eats the suffering? In this lecture I'm going to attempt to answer that question. We know our shared planet is bounteous enough and our sciences are now advanced enough to provide everyone living with decent standards of food, water, shelter, education, and health care - so why should poverty and its attendant suffering

continue to be ramped up? We might ask ourselves: *Cui bono?* Who benefits?"

"Paul Masson and the Mondavi Brothers sure as heck benefit," says Warren, setting aside the marimba mallets to snatch up his large glass of wine. Everyone's a comedian tonight.

I just go with it. "Perhaps we should begin with a thought experiment: What kind of a god would have made a world like this one? A world in which the fundamental rule governing all life is: *Eat or be eaten*. A world predicated on killing, in which everything that's born is fated to die – sometimes by being ripped apart while still alive. 'Death the kraken waits to drown you / In the sea of earth,' as the ancient Greeks used to sing. A cheery little jingle, isn't it? Death makes a joke of us all... and each of us has to live with the knowledge that someday – perhaps quite painfully – we'll end up as yet another punch line."

"I'd rather be a dirty limerick," says James.

"Me, too," I agree, "but unfortunately that's not a decision we're allowed to make. So I'm just asking: What sort of a god would have put us in this predicament? Mortality, pain, suffering, credit card debt... whom do we have to thank for that? Is it the Big Daddy American Christian God espoused by those evangelical hypocrites, the Reverends Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker, and Pat Robertson?"

"The good Lord says to send us your money!" James shouts in a televangelist's tremolo. "We need fifty million dollars to stop the homos and abortionists from taking over Congress!"

"Earlier this year, Jimmy Swaggart made a tearful confession on national television. Apparently, he'd been

having secret prayer meetings in cheap motel rooms so his pious cock could worship at the slick pink altars of a Louisiana hooker.”

“Lord, don’t ask me to choose between Jesus and pussy,” James bawls, imitating Swaggart, “’cuz I’m a sinner and I’ll choose pussy ev’ry time!”

A half-squelched laugh escapes me and I almost lose it, but I regain my composure and keeps forging ahead: “Jim Bakker’s Praise the Lord Club has been shaking down senile old church ladies for years to get a piece of their Social Security checks, but that’s no longer enough for him. He’s now being investigated by a Federal grand jury on charges of mail fraud, wire fraud, and conspiracy. Oh... and he also paid \$279,000 in hush money to a girl he’d boned out of wedlock named Jessica Hahn.”

“Ditto for me, Lord,” James shouts, imitating Bakker this time. “Tammy Faye didn’t like it, but I couldn’t get me enough o’ that sweet Jessica Hahn’s tasty poontang!”

“Jimmy Swaggart had been hugely incensed over that sin with Jessica Hahn in particular, going on ‘Larry King Live’ last year to denounce Bakker as ‘a cancer in the body of Christ.’ I guess it takes one to know one.”

“We’re all just hopeless horndogs for our Heavenly Father and the Virgin Mary,” shouts James, lifting his arms in praise. “*Especially* the Virgin Mary.”

“Pat Robertson, God help us all, is running for President. He wants to eliminate the Department of Education and the Department of Energy. Who needs ‘em, right? Let the free market take control! That way it’ll be a lot easier to have our poor kids educated by book-burning religious zealots

and wannabe fascists. And at the same time, we can do away with all those pesky pollution control laws.”

“Lord bless our corporate sponsors. Hallelujah!”

“If the Christian God made this world and these guys are His representatives – His paragons of virtue – well, all I can say is: *He must really have it in for us.*”

“Amen!” James and Warren shout in unison.

“That’s what the Gnostics believed, in case you didn’t know: that the Christian God, Jehovah, was a fucking maniac – a cosmic sadist. Jealous, pissed-off all the time, slaughtering innocents whenever and wherever He damn well felt like it; afflicting Job and all the rest of us with trials and tribulations because he’s made a schoolboy’s bet with Satan – the equivalent of one kid saying to another, ‘Hey, let’s see how long this bug can crawl with its wings pulled off while we try to burn it with a really big magnifying glass.’”

“That’ll put the fear of God in you, you fucking bug,” says James.

“The Gnostics had another name for the god of this world. They called him the Demiurge. The Half-Maker. And in their considered opinion, this Half-Maker made our world in a half-assed way.”

“Ass-backward is more like it,” Warren grumbles. He plinks at the marimba one-handed, keeping his wine glass in the other hand, held close to his throat.

“This is not the sort of world an all-powerful, all-loving, and all-knowing god would have created, say the Gnostics, because it’s a world that tolerates evil and suffering. In fact, evil and suffering actually thrive in this world. The Christians explain that away by saying that man creates evil

and we suffer – even innocent little children suffer – because of Original Sin. But the Gnostics say that’s bullshit. If God created man, He can’t avoid the ultimate responsibility for man’s fate. Only a flawed creator would create a flawed universe. Call Him Yahweh, Ialdabaoth, Allah, the Demiurge, Father Yig, or Whatever... the Guy In Charge is a vicious bastard, plain and simple.”

In the voice of a stammering schoolboy, James says, “*Buh* – but God also made puppies and kittens and pretty girls... who give nasty *buh-b*-blowjobs.”

“From the Gnostic perspective, the material world is a trap,” I explain; “*the Black Iron Prison*, as Philip K. Dick called it. The evil flaws of the Demiurge are inherent in every earthly thing. Puppies and kittens squeeze out shit every day. Pretty girls turn into shrewish wives. And blowjobs, as we all know, lead to all kinds of trouble.”

“That’s why Trouble is my middle name,” boasts James.

“Everything you love about life – everything you cherish with your five senses – is an illusion created by that dark magician, the Demiurge. Those illusions are meant to distract you from your soul’s true purpose: seeking union with the Light of the True God. See, the Gnostics believe that a True God exists somewhere beyond this Time-Space Illusion – a True God that is the original, infinite Source of the Light and the Good. They have many speculations as to why and how the Demiurge came into being, but basically, the Gnostics believe that the Demiurge wandered too far from the Light of the True God and created this world of darkness and excrement as a self-indulgent experiment – a sort of Great Jacking Off into the cosmos.”

“I heard the Demiurge went blind from doing that,” James cracks.

“As a matter of fact, in the ancient Gnostic tractates discovered at Nag Hammadi in December of 1945, the Demiurge is also referred to as Samael, which translates from Aramaic as ‘the Blind God.’ Blind, no doubt, because the Demiurge operates in the shadows, far from the True God’s Light. However, the Demiurge also has god-like powers, so at least half of that Half-Maker – its forgotten half – must have originated from the True God. Therefore everything created in this world by the Demiurge must contain a Divine Spark of the True God’s Light – or so the Gnostics would have us believe. According to them, Jesus knew what he was talking about when he said, ‘The Kingdom of God is within.’”

“But most of the time, Jesus just talked a lot of shit,” James cheerfully blasphemes.

“The Gnostics insist that the acquisition of *Gnosis*, or spiritual knowledge, will lead us to liberate our Divine Sparks from the trap of the material world and rejoin the True God in heaven, or wherever...” I explain. “Sounds good, right? But what if we’re *property*? as Charles Fort used to go around saying. What if ‘Someone’ coming from a transgalactic ‘Somewhere’ explored and colonized our planet – and now that Someone owns us, in the same way that a rancher owns cattle? It’s a depressing thought, I know... but it might explain a whole lot.”

“It would explain why I wake up every morning feeling like I’ve been milked,” says James.

“You’re probably just having wet dreams,” the blonde in the halter-top heckles him.

“You should know...” James tells her. “You’ll be starring in them tonight.”

The blonde laughs and looks away, gorgeous in her embarrassment.

“Ever since the Epic of Gilgamesh, written over 4,000 years ago in Ancient Mesopotamia,” I free-associate, “men have been blaming their wet dreams on sexy female demons that seduce them while they sleep. A demon of that sort is most commonly called a succubus – a kind of nympho lady vampire that steals a dreaming man’s sperm... and sometimes his breath – or his blood.”

“I hate having my jizz stolen like that,” says James. “Is there any way I can get it back?”

“There’s no way!” the blonde crows triumphantly. “It’s mine! All mine!” Then she lets loose with a villainous laugh: *mwuh-ha-ha-ha-ha!*

Definitely an actress....

Back to the subject at hand: “According to certain legends, after the succubus has loaded up on stolen sperm she turns into an incubus – her male demon equivalent with a freezing cold penis. The incubus then goes off to rape some sleeping woman, preferably a virgin. Sometimes an infernal pregnancy results. The half-human offspring of those rare, hellish couplings is known as a cambion.”

“A Cambrian?” asks James, deliberately mishearing so he can get in a jab at his fellow townsfolk.

“A *cambion*,” I enunciate. “There’s no need to get everyone riled up about this over at the Cambria Post Office. Gilgamesh’s father was said to be a cambion; so was Merlin, from the legends of King Arthur; and Caliban, from Shakespeare’s ‘The Tempest.’”

“And my ex-wife, from Fresno,” Warren chimes in with a little *bada-bing* on the marimba.

“Even the Bible tells of horny high jinks going on between humans and otherworldly entities. Right off the bat, in *Genesis*, the so-called ‘sons of God’ – the Nephilim – ‘went to the daughters of men and had children by them.’ That word, Nephilim, has been variously translated as ‘giants’ or ‘Those Who Were Cast Down’ – so you could definitely make an argument that they, too, were demons. Their half-human progeny were said to be ‘the heroes of old, men of renown.’ More cambions....”

“So we all might have a little demon in us, somewhere way down in the deep end of our gene pool,” James concludes.

“You especially, as I recall.”

“You’re not doing too shabby yourself there, Mister Hippie Wizard. About four hundred years ago the Inquisition would have hunted you down like a rabid dog and burned you at the stake for that shit you’ve been pulling at Esalen.”

“You’re right,” I concede. “I even learned how to fly around kind of like an incubus myself a few years ago. A guy named Robert Monroe came to Esalen and taught me how to do it. You may have heard of him. Robert Monroe wrote a book called *Journeys Out of the Body* that became an international bestseller; then he followed it up with a sequel that came out not too long ago, called *Far Journeys*. He’s the world’s leading authority on the subject of out-of-body experiences – or, as it used to be called, astral projection.”

“The guy must be a total flake,” James sneers. “He probably skips around in a tie-dyed leisure suit and tells everyone that if they close their eyes and wish really hard, they can fly to the Taj Mahal on a magic carpet and see Santa Claus blowing soap bubbles out his butt.”

“Actually, he’s a businessman – the president of a multi-million-dollar cable TV company in Virginia. He’s used a lot of his own money to fund a research lab called the Monroe Institute that studies out-of-body experiences, or OBEs, as he calls them. Someday in the not-too-distant future, I think Robert Monroe will be regarded as one of the greatest paranormal investigators of the twentieth-century, a man who taught us as much about the non-physical realms as Newton and Copernicus taught us about our physical universe. With an experienced staff of psychiatrists, medical researchers, and audio engineers, the Monroe Institute has had some amazing success inducing out-of-body experiences in ordinary people using studio-enhanced sound patterns that synchronize the right and left hemispheres of the brain. It’s called the ‘Hemi-Sync’ process – and believe me, it works.”

“And if you order right now,” James cuts in with a late-night TV announcer’s voice, “for five monthly payments of just \$14.99, we’ll also send you Aleister Crowley’s patented Cloak of Invisibility, absolutely free!”

“I tried a Hemi-Sync tape for the first time right after Robert Monroe’s lecture,” I say, ignoring James. “I went back to my cabin and got into bed with a pair of headphones. The tape had a soothing, hypnotic effect. In less than twenty minutes, it put me into a deep state of relaxation. My mind seemed half-awake, but my body felt asleep. Then I heard Monroe’s recorded voice saying, ‘Remember your purpose, the purpose for this exercise...’ and I fully woke up again – only, I swear, I was seeing right through my closed eyelids. The first thing I saw was a pine tree outside my window, looking kind of sketchy and gray. I reached my arm out toward it and I felt myself stretch like

rubber and leave my body in one fluid motion. I flew through the closed window without breaking it, and then I made sort of a shaky glide over to the tree trunk. When I touched its bark with my astral hand, it felt totally real – not like a dream at all. That freaked me out a little, so I flew back to my room. I didn't want to get stuck out there. When I got back, I looked down and saw my own body sprawled out on the bed, fast asleep. Something about it struck me as kind of grotesque. Then I coughed, or I had a subtle shift in consciousness – I'm still not sure what happened – but in an instant, I was right back in my body, wide awake, and looking at things from my usual, physical perspective again."

"So you didn't fly around and find some sleeping shaman babe to hose with your icy astral dick?" asks James. "Because that's what I would've done. Pronto."

"I didn't have much control that first time," I admit. "And the thought of committing astral rape doesn't really appeal to me, anyway."

"You're so chivalrous!" the blonde pipes up. "But if you're out and about later tonight, you should try to lay me. *Really!* I won't mind, since it's only astral. Besides, I'm on the pill."

"I might take you up on that," I say to her, my words getting picked up by the microphone. Hoots of encouragement erupt from a group of guys standing around the pool table near the saloon's entrance. James was right: the lecture has been bringing in more customers.

"You're such a slut," James chides the blonde in a friendly way. "What happened to stealing my jizz tonight?"

"I'll do that too," the blonde promises him. Then she asks, "Is that it for the lecture?"

Brain-befogged by visions of epic astral boning, I've been staring off into space, gape-mouthed, for a few moments too long. I snap out of it. "Um, actually... there's one more thing. During Robert Monroe's many hundreds of out-of-body excursions he claims he encountered 'light beings' that possess knowledge vastly superior to our own. Ostensibly, they passed along some of their knowledge to Monroe in 'thought-balls' that convey instantaneous information in the form of imagery, experience, history, and intuited language. He calls those thought-balls 'rotes.' It's like turbocharged telepathy. 'Running a rote' is almost the same as recalling an event that you've lived through, except that every detail is accessible and perfectly clear. One of the rotes that particularly caught my attention - which Monroe wrote about in his most recent book, *Far Journeys* - concerns something called Loosh. While I'm telling you about it, you might want to think about how Loosh ties in with everything else I've mentioned in this admittedly rambling talk I've just given."

"Let's hear it for Loosh!" James cheers. He's abandoned his bongos to go over and stand in front of the beer taps, where Mavis is pouring him another pint of Guinness. "Hey Gordon, you want one?"

"Sure," I say. I'm feeling nearly sober. Thinking about Loosh makes me want to be drunk again. "Okay, so... Loosh. Where do I start? As Robert Monroe describes it, Loosh is a form of spiritual and emotional energy - or maybe *psychic energy* would be a better term for it. It's almost synonymous with *life force*, or the Latin term *vis vitae*, or the Hebrew noun *nephesh*, or Wilhelm Reich's *orgone*, or

the Chinese concept of *qi* – but there's a twist: Loosh also serves as food for other interdimensional entities."

"That reminds me..." James interrupts, "we should head over to my place for dinner once we're done here. I'll call Frankie and let her know you're coming."

Who's Frankie? I wonder... then I get back on track as James heads for the pay phone back by the restrooms:

"According to Robert Monroe, the rote on Loosh revealed that prospectors from Somewhere had been searching the universe far and wide for Loosh, which only occurs in its natural state during certain vibrational actions in the carbon-oxygen cycle. Loosh was highly valued by the denizens of Somewhere – sought after like some rare and fabulously addictive drug, or an exotic but necessary fuel. There was never enough of it to go around. At some point about 14 billion years ago, Someone got the bright idea of making a Garden to grow Loosh artificially. So that same Someone went off to a remote corner of the universe and set to work on His experiment –

– which makes Him sound an awful lot like a certain Someone Else known as the Demiurge, don't you think? Anyway, to start off, Someone created an ideal setting for the carbon-oxygen cycle, where it could flourish. He conjured up a big ball of mud and left it simmering the proper distance from a nearby sun. Then He added clouds, seas, rain, wind, lightning, volcanoes, and a moon in a tidally locked orbit. Soon, Someone was ready to try out His First Crop.

"It was a bust. The crop of single-celled organisms floating around in Someone's primordial soup actually produced Loosh, but only in miniscule amounts, and only at the moment of death. It also turned out to be low-grade

Loosh, not the high quality distilled Loosh that Someone prized above all else.

“So Someone went back to His drawing board and came up with a Second Crop. This one was set down on a base of higher-density chemicals and given tendrils that would burrow down into that base to supply the crop with nutrients. Someone also supplied the crop with stems and trunks in great variety that would elevate the upper portions of the crop so that life-giving radiation could be gathered from the Sun. We’re talking about something like the proliferation of land plants during the Devonian period, obviously. But this Second Crop also failed to make the grade in terms of Loosh production. The Loosh was of such low quality that it was hardly worth harvesting, although it was being produced in much greater abundance.

“Something’s missing, thought Someone. Wild, uncultivated Loosh was so much better than this farmed Loosh he was producing. Someone thought long and hard about what to do next.

“He’d had some luck during the Cambrian Explosion, about 540 million years ago, when, in a fit of pique, Someone had made multicellular aquatic creatures with eyes and claws and fangs and fanciful armor so they could do battle with one another. Those battles among His menagerie of marine species had been intended only for Someone’s amusement, but he fortuitously discovered that conflict seemed to produce a higher quality Loosh, especially when a creature was in its death throes. With that in mind, Someone moved some of the most hardy and vicious sea creatures onto dry land and adapted them so they would be mobile and able to breathe the gaseous air

and eat the Second Crop plants for sustenance. And then Someone had them start eating *each other*.

“That was Someone’s big idea for the Third Crop: the dinosaurs, of course. The dinosaurs were good Loosh producers – the best yet. Their Loosh output was massive when they died, especially during a struggle when one tore open and ingested the vigorous young body of another. Dinosaur Loosh was also of reasonably high quality. So Someone went into the Loosh export business, transmitting a steady stream of raw Loosh to Somewhere via Special Collectors and Channels that must operate somehow like gigantic astral vacuum hoses.

“Someone started reaping great rewards for His efforts. But He still wasn’t satisfied. Dinosaurs were just too damn big and long-lived to be practical. Someone determined that if their population kept growing on its projected trajectory, the Second Crop of plants would be wiped out – and then everything else would go with them. End of Garden. Someone was also convinced that smaller, faster, and smarter creatures would ‘expand the Conflict factor’ and produce even higher-quality Loosh.

“So with a single, massive asteroid hurled at the Yucatán Peninsula around sixty-five million years ago, Someone wiped out all the Third Crop dinosaurs in one of the biggest Loosh harvests ever seen up to that point. I’m guessing it made Him a very famous and wealthy Someone back in Somewhere – although Robert Monroe doesn’t mention that in his book. What happened next involves *us*....

“Someone started turning out an incredible assortment of Fourth Crop creatures – thousands upon thousands of them. Each was outfitted with some ingenious feature or other that would help facilitate predator-prey conflict.

Some could fly and grasp other creatures in their talons. Some had horns for gouging or hooves for kicking. Some were incredibly fast. Some could climb and some could burrow, some could swim and some could leap. And some had mouths full of very sharp teeth. Others were simply massive and strong, although never quite as massive and strong as the largest Third Crop dinosaurs.

“You get the idea... it was our world of predation: *Eat or be eaten*. Loosh production shot way, way up. And then Someone got creative with some primate genes and designed a creature that was rather weak and pathetic in comparison to most of the other Fourth Crop creatures. No horns, no claws... fragile skin, dull teeth... hell, it couldn't even spit poison from its eyeballs, or shoot barbed quills from its anus. What good was it? The only advantage it had was that it could eat both Second Crop plants and Fourth Crop creatures – including those of its own kind, as some cannibals would later discover. It was Early Man, of course.

“Early Man was so incredibly ill-matched to his environment that Someone ‘pulled forth a Piece of Himself’ and infused it into his latest creation – smack dab in the double-helix of Early Man’s DNA, I’m guessing – thus providing Early Man with a unique catalyst for unceasing mobility. Much like the Gnostic concept of the Divine Spark, this tiny mote of Someone gave Early Man an impossible-to-fulfill yearning to seek union with the infinite Whole – or at least with that Loosh-eating Somewhere that was Someone’s far-away home. The idea was that the conflict between man’s need for ceaseless motion and his need for energy replacement would be constant, thereby turning him into a Loosh producer of the highest order. Provided he could survive, of course.

“Man not only survived... he took over the planet, as we all know. The Fourth Crop, man included, produced high-quality Loosh in quantities far beyond Someone’s wildest expectations. Even more thrilling, Someone later discovered that purified and distilled Loosh was somehow being emitted in tiny but distinct quantities. Previously, distilled Loosh had only been seen after ‘wild state’ Loosh had been taken back to Somewhere and processed many times. Someone’s farmed Loosh had been going through the same process, but now here it was, already distilled in the raw. It was like opening a tap at the bottom of a grain storage silo and seeing Stolichnaya vodka pour out, instead of wheat.

“Someone conducted a search throughout his Garden for the source of this purified and distilled Loosh. He discovered that the distilled Loosh was being generated whenever a Fourth Crop creature entered mortal combat to defend its young offspring. Then Someone found an even greater emanation of distilled Loosh coming from the Fourth Crop creatures with a Piece of Himself in them – Early Man – whenever they got lonely or sad. In fact, whenever they were in Someone’s presence, they got so lonely and upset that they fell to their knees and prayed. The distilled Loosh they emitted on those occasions was even more delicious and nutritious than usual.”

“What a bunch of pussies!” James is back. He passes me a pint of Guinness and takes his seat behind the bongos again.

I drink gratefully. “Ah... thanks!” I wipe my foam-flecked mouth on my sleeve and start wrapping up the lecture:

“Someone was a bit of an obsessive-compulsive type, always concerned with fine-tuning the output of his Loosh

production above everything else, which is why he split all His Crops into Halves – male and female – to engender loneliness as they sought to reunite with each other, impossibly, in Wholeness. That wasn't all. Someone and His Collectors also developed an incredible array of tools and techniques over the eons designed to maximize their all-important Loosh harvest. The most common are known to us by names such as love and fear, greed and sacrifice, family, guilt, pride, shame, orgasm, pain – you get the idea.... On a larger scale, for mass harvesting, there's also war, famine, floods, religion, terrorism, epidemics, nuclear weapons, capitalism, socialism, the Federal Reserve, and so forth. Today Galactic Loosh Farming is at an all-time high, thanks to the unflagging efforts and ingenuity of our Sponsors.

“So who eats the suffering? Someone's Somewhere, according to Robert Monroe, who should know. That's not much of an answer, I realize, but at least now you have a better understanding of how the whole process might work. After Monroe unpacked the Loosh rote he said it took him several months to work through the complete cycle of denial, anger, depression, and acceptance – like one of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' patients after being diagnosed with a fatal illness. It completely changed his perspective on the Earth's history and on human behavior. It made sense. It explained everything quite neatly. But it didn't help him sleep any better.

“So. Now we know that a fatal illness has a hidden purpose, other than to just fucking kill us. It's been deliberately designed to produce high-quality Loosh. Now we know why Reaganomics increases our suffering nationwide and our elected officials think that's a *good*

thing. It's good because it increases the Loosh harvest and that's all that matters to Someone and His Collectors - or *Archons*, to use the Gnostic term for those puppet masters in the shadows, pulling our strings. The Gnostics also had a word for the Archons' collective tyranny over man's fate. *Heimarmene*, they called it. Heimarmene's aim is the total enslavement of humankind in this world and the next. With that goal in mind, the Archons not only feast on our suffering here on Earth, they also do whatever they can to bar the passage of souls seeking to ascend from this miserable cosmic prison after death and return to the True God.

"For what it's worth, Gurdjieff had a similar view of man's fate. He used to say that if people refused to do the inner work that served the purposes of 'Great Nature' then their excess energy would be extracted from them in the form of 'useless suffering.' He called the process Food for the Moon. But Gurdjieff didn't see our situation as hopeless. Maybe the masses were doomed, but he believed that individual men and women could outwit the forces that exploit humanity. In his usual cryptic style, he wrote: 'The liberation that comes with the growth of mental powers and faculties is liberation from the Moon.'

"Food for the Moon, Loosh for Someone's Somewhere... it amounts to pretty much the same thing, doesn't it? If we're looking for more parallels, perhaps the knowledge - or *Gnosis* - that Robert Monroe gained during his out-of-body experiences can be equated to Gurdjieff's growth of mental powers and faculties. If so, then we might have a way out. Because during another one of Monroe's out-of-body excursions many months later, after he'd gotten over the initial shock of the Loosh rote, he was reminded by a very

knowledgeable 'light being' that *love* also produces high-quality distilled Loosh. In fact, it might even be the best Loosh of all."

James starts singing the chorus to the Beatles' song, "All You Need Is Love," in a tremulous falsetto. Warren Talcott plinks out the proper accompanying rhythm on the marimba for once.

"Maybe it's true," I say: "*All you need is love...*" just like the Beatles said. Maybe the Earth is a lovingly designed and constructed school for accelerated learning that teaches us to be the very best love-infused Loosh producers we can be. But somehow, with the way things are now, I doubt it."

Applause, hoots, and the clang of a cowbell resound throughout the saloon as I bend at the waist for a brief theatrical bow that probably looks as if I'm checking to see if my pants are unzipped. Cacophony ensues as James kicks over his bongos and mock-savages the marimba with the chrome microphone stand like Keith Moon at the end of a Who concert, generating a prolonged parrot shriek of feedback from the P.A. system. Wide-eyed Warren Talcott moves to protect his wine glass as James leaps high into the air with a flying scissor kick and lands on top of me, slapping my palm with a sweaty high-five.

"Good talk," James pants. "Now let's go eat some ribs!"

OBE-101: AN INTRODUCTION TO LOOSH

Even though we repeatedly visited Gordon during his dreams to infuse him with knowledge while he was writing his lecture on Galactic Loosh Farming and Reaganomics, he still got some of it wrong. And Gordon, it should be noted, is much better at paying attention to his dreams than most. It just goes to show you: communication between the physical realm and the astral realm is a bitch.

The astral realm on the Other Side is made up of astral matter, which shares a lot of the same characteristics with the subatomic particles that make up physical matter, only it hasn't acquired mass yet (via the handy help of the so-called Higgs field, etc.), therefore it exerts no gravitational pull on anything physical. Psychic energy - or Loosh, as Robert Monroe was taught to call it - animates all astral matter and can be used, by certain advanced souls, to produce changes in it.

We talk about Loosh on the Other Side in the same way that people on Earth talk about money. Loosh is the stuff that keeps us going. It can be used as a medium of exchange. But certain entities - the Archons, in particular - choose to steal Loosh rather than earn it, by preying on those who are weaker or less knowledgeable. Those of us in the Invisible College think that's fucked-up. Our goal is to see it stopped.

Every person on Earth (and elsewhere) has a soul made of astral matter. Each individual soul is composed of a higher soul that seeks union with the divine spirit, and a lower soul that identifies with the False Self and its attachments to the physical realm. The lower soul usually resembles a person's physical body, although it tends to show up zit-free and otherwise idealized in its astral incarnation. The higher soul is infinitely malleable in its appearance, but it always carries the telepathic signature of that soul's True Self, or immortal spirit.

A spirit, in case you were wondering, is just a soul that has transcended the limitations of its physical body and lower astral soul. It can will its own form or reside in a state of formless awareness. That's the short answer, at least. Most of us in the Invisible College are spirits - for now. And now is all there is on the Other Side - an Eternal Now. No past, no future, every moment that ever was, or will be, accessible all at once.

Don't worry... it's not as confusing as it sounds. You'll easily get the hang of it once you've met your meat-death. For the moment, you might want to think of the Other Side as having an infinite number of holographic movies-on-demand, with spirits in charge of the remotes.

There is an astral Earth realm on the Other Side that overlays the physical Earth realm, interpenetrating it, but on a slightly different frequency that's imperceptible to the physical five senses. So you can't see, hear, or smell us (which is fortunate, because the Archons have a characteristic stench of warm cat piss and cinnamon). Spirits from many different realms with highly evolved civilizations are being sent to the Earth realms to assist the Invisible College in its fight to liberate souls from the

tyranny and exploitation of the Archons. Space travel turns out to be easy, provided it's interrealm via the astral multiverse, rather than intergalactic in a physical universe.

When spirits visiting the astral Earth realm run low on Loosh, they have to incarnate on the physical Earth. Although they may not have looked even remotely human during their previous incarnations, they still share our same basic DNA structure, so they can slide right into human bodies. During their physical Earth incarnations, they lose most of their memories from their previous civilizations, but some still retain a touch of otherness that native Earthlings can intuitively recognize. You'd know that if you'd ever met David Bowie in the flesh - or from the Archons' side, Dick Cheney or Donald Rumsfeld.

So if you've ever wondered if extraterrestrials have visited our planet, now you have your answer: Earth is actually swarming with them, but the vast majority are hidden inside human bodies - which wouldn't be so bad, if it weren't for the fact that some of those alien bastards want to pump you bone dry of Loosh.

PRECAMBRIAN DEMIMONDE

“You probably don’t remember me... but I remember you.”

It’s the blonde in the pink halter-top, stepping in front of me as I’m leaving, trying to make my way toward the saloon’s double doors. She sets her sweating gin and tonic on the edge of the pool table and wipes her damp palm on the back of her pretty white Mexican skirt before she shakes my hand. “I used to live across the street from you. I’m Rina. Rina Rowley.”

The name triggers memories of a thin, feisty girl with braces and frizzy white hair. When we were kids, I used to play Red Light, Green Light with her on dusky summer lawns. Back then Rina always wore a bumpy training bra under her clothes, even though she was years away from needing one. Also, and far stranger, I seem to recall that she had a chocolate-colored Doberman pinscher named Raymundo that I saw being ritualistically murdered in my pediatrician’s backyard.

“Weren’t you the girl who went around with green rubber bands on your braces?” I ask her. *Probably best not to bring up the dog....*

“Yup. That was me. I’ve learned not to accessorize so much these days.” She throws her arms wide open, as if inviting me to hug her, or at least check out the whole package.

"Wow," I say, "you grew up." *And filled out*, I think, glancing at her spectacular boobs.

"They're real," Rina assures me. "My dad's a chiropractor. He'd kill me if I got implants."

"So Crash... who's your smokin' hot new friend?" James asks, coming up behind me.

"Oh, hey... Rina, this is James. Rina went to school with us."

"A long time ago," Rina cuts in. "My parents live out on a ranch near Creston now, not all that far from here. We moved away from Kingsburg back when I was in the fourth grade."

"Too bad," says James. "It would've been great perving on you in high school."

"I used to think Gordon was *sooooo* cute," Rina coos. "I don't remember you, though."

If James is nonplussed by Rina's memory lapse - or outright dismissal of him - he doesn't show it. "I was Gordon's studly best friend," he brags, "but we weren't, um, hanging out together so much back in fourth grade."

"James tried to kill me by dropping me out of his tree house when I was seven years old," I tell Rina. "He actually put a hangman's noose around my neck, but it broke."

"Youthful pranks..." James shrugs.

"Ooh, I remember when you got out of the hospital for that," Rina pouts, expressing sympathy and simultaneously drawing attention to her high cheekbones. "God, you were so banged up. That was *James* who did that?" She shoots James a mean look, making her eyebrows go as straight as

her platinum bangs. James backs up a few steps, holding out his palms, as if she's a feral animal about to pounce.

"I got over it," I tell her, "but we didn't really get back to being friends again until we started high school."

"Seventh grade," James corrects me. "In Mr. Olsen's journalism class, to be exact. I was the staff photographer and Gordon was the Opinions Editor of that now-legendary junior high school newspaper known as *The Viking Voice*. We made an excellent pair of muckrakers."

"Really?" Rina brightens. "Because I was just talking to the editor of another newspaper a while ago. Actually, she's still here." She turns and waves to the silver-haired woman who had been sitting at the bar with her earlier. "Nora!" Rina shouts. "Come over here and meet a couple of newspaper guys, like you!"

Nora ambles over, drink and reporter's notebook in hand. She has coolly appraising blue eyes set in a sagging, jowly face that could almost belong to a basset hound. My guess is that she's at least sixty, if not older. Her clothes are stylish in a bohemian-with-a-trust-fund sort of way, but her silver hair is cut in an unfortunate bob that almost perfectly replicates a basset's long, floppy ears. It reminds me of a dog I had when I was growing up, a narcoleptic basset hound named Samantha – Sam, for short. I'd loved that dog above all other creatures (including people) in my boyhood universe. I feel a conflated sense of affection bordering on love for Nora, without knowing anything even so basic about her as her last name.

"Nora Biddle-Whitney," Nora says with a flip of her veiny wrist, "Editor and Publisher of the *Cambria Insurrectionist*." Nora has a Boston Brahmin accent that makes her newspaper's title sound like the name of a

fabulous old yacht that Katharine Hepburn might have been fond of messing about in while she was spreading her legs for Spencer Tracy.

I take Nora's extended hand, finding it dry and as seemingly fragile as a fistful of autumn leaves, but then she tightens her grip and I'm amazed by her strength. "Gordon Swannson," I say, wincing for lame-headed comic effect, "and this is my friend, James."

"More popularly known as A.C. Nightshade," James says with a trace of irony intended to disguise his utter lack of humility.

"Oh yes, the infamous radio DJ! I've thought about interviewing you for a local color story," Nora says. James preens. "But then I realized that interviewing Lady Tie-Dye would make for a much livelier piece. Her political posturing is so confrontational, don't you think?"

"You mean that time she went topless and chained herself to the gate in front of Nitt-Witt Ridge to stop the county from selling it for back taxes?"

"Yes! I have some fabulous pictures to go along with that story."

"I'll bet you do. Are her nipples standing up in them? She told me it was really cold that day. And she was, like, stoned out of her mind."

"Speaking of nipples..." Rina says, "I was telling Nora earlier about how cold it was in Russia, where I was working on a movie with my boyfriend, Axel, the director? It was so freezing that I had to do all my scenes with Band-Aids on my nipples, otherwise they would've been popping out all over the place."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," says James.

"So you're an actress?" I ask her.

"Kind of, yeah."

"A very accomplished actress," Nora fills in. "I was interviewing Rina today for a 'Local Girl Makes Good' human interest story. She's starring in the first full-length feature film ever to be shot in the Soviet Union with the full cooperation of the KGB. It's a spy thriller called *Stalin Says*."

"Actually, it's more of a comedy, really..." says Rina, "with softcore porn elements."

"You didn't happen to mention that earlier, dear," Nora says to her.

"So it's a screwball comedy with actual screwing?" James asks.

"- and balling," I append.

"Cool!" shouts James with perhaps too much enthusiasm.

"Well, it's not like I gave anyone a real blowjob or anything," Rina says in her defense. "They have stunt cocks and professional fluffers for that. And besides, most of those scenes will only show up in the unrated European version."

"I bet there's hardly any blowjobs at all in the American release, right?" says James.

"No, not any... but I kind of get tied up to a dentist's chair and raped by a circus bear at one point."

"Oh, Rina!" exclaims Nora.

"But Axel said I had to do it to advance the plot!" Rina wails. "And besides, he swore I'd be getting raped very tastefully, with no close-ups or heavy breathing from the Serbian midgets wearing diapers."

"Well, thank goodness for that!"

"That bear was actually a very nice bear," Rina pouts. "He was quite a gentleman about it. I gave him a few nice pats on his big, fuzzy-wuzzy head after he was done."

"Did they get the money shot when Mister Big Fuzzy-Wuzzy shot his bear jizz all over your tits?" James asks her.

Rina responds by slugging him in the arm.

"Hey! Ow!"

"You have to admit, Nora, it makes a better story this way," I say.

"Yes, but not for a family newspaper."

"I can already see the headline: *Commie Bear Rapes Local Sweetheart.*"

"God! James was so right when he said you two were muckrakers," Rina huffs, pretending to be humiliated. "I just feel so... *mucky* now." She shakes and waggles her fingertips, as if she's flinging off invisible clumps of mud.

"Well, I, for one, was quite impressed by that impromptu lecture you gave us, Gordon," Nora says. "You obviously have a flair for words. I wonder... would you ever consider writing for me? I could use another seasoned journalist on my staff."

"I wouldn't exactly call myself a 'seasoned journalist,'" I tell her, "unless four years of high school journalism qualifies me."

"That's three more years of experience than anyone else listed on our masthead, aside from myself. We've only been in business for a few months."

"And raising hell the whole time," James puts in. "It's The Little Community Newspaper That Won't Back The Fuck Off."

Nora continues her recruitment pitch: "I couldn't afford to pay you much – just \$5.50 an hour to start – but I'd be quite grateful for the assistance. The job also comes with certain added enticements, like free meals at some of our advertisers' local restaurants."

"Eating is a good thing," I say, remaining uncommitted.

"And free gin at this place!" James adds in a jaunty tone. Apparently, he's seen Nora in Old Camozzi's Saloon before.

A flush rises to Nora's wrinkled cheeks, but she quickly recovers. "And what about you, James?" she asks. "Would you care to join our crusade against small-town corruption, violence, and scumbaggery? Revisit your glory days of muckraking?"

"I get to do plenty of that on my radio show," James says, "but if you're looking for a photographer, I might be your guy."

"Can you develop film and make prints in a darkroom? Our current darkroom technician has decided he has a more lucrative career ahead of him as a tree surgeon."

"Ma'am, I'm a veritable whiz in the darkroom."

"Fine! Then you're hired – so long as your eloquent friend comes along with you, to keep you in line. I have a sneaking suspicion you'd be too much trouble on your own."

"You'll just be getting double trouble," James tells her. "You have no idea what a madman this guy is." He turns to me. "So how about it, dude? Feel like putting down some roots: getting a job, a house, and then maybe a frigid wife and some bratty kids?"

"I don't know..." I say. "I thought I was just passing through."

"That's what all the girls said to him at Esalen," James tells Nora, "right before THEY STOMPED ON HIS FUCKING HEART!"

"Oh, poor Gordon...." Rina pats my cheek and squeezes her lips into a sexy moue.

"So c'mon, man!" James goads me. "It'll be the Crash and James journalistic tag team all over again!"

"It sounds tempting."

"Tempting? That's all you can say: It sounds tempting? That's so pussified. C'mon, Cambria's a fuckin' great place to live!"

"It is," Nora concurs. "You really should think about it."

I've been thinking about it very seriously.... Maybe working for a newspaper, devoting my energies to some cause greater than myself, would be just the thing to get me past my morbid self-consciousness. Maybe I'd feel less alienated if I had a close friend nearby who knew me from childhood - no matter how fucked up that childhood might've been.

"I guess I could give it a shot," I decide. "Everything I own is already packed in my Jeep. And it's not like I had anywhere else to go. I was just wandering."

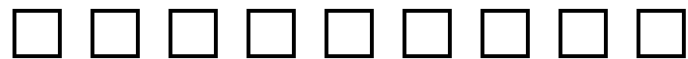
"Maybe you've just wandered home..." Nora says, embracing me warmly. "Stop by my office around ten tomorrow, and we'll get right to work." She hands me a business card. "You too, James. Do you have your own camera?"

Inspired, perhaps, by a recent viewing of the exploitation classic, *Mandingo*, James says in a deep Southern Negro voice: "I gots me a big ol' black Mamiya RZ67 with a extra-long, telephoto lens. Most ladies, they never seen such a big

camera afore. It most always puts a fright in 'em. *'Lawdy!'* they say, *'Get dat monster thang away from me!'* But don't you worry none, ma'am... I knows how to use it."

With an aggrieved sigh, Rina asks James, "Is everything about sex with you?"

"Pretty much," he admits.



Out in the parking lot behind Old Camozzi's Saloon, James climbs into a low, sleek black 1967 Corvette convertible with a sinister spider-webbing of white pinstripes along its flanks and the red hourglass shape from a black widow's belly lacquered onto its hood scoop. The top is down, revealing a pristine oxblood red leather interior. Big, sinuous chrome side pipes gleam just beneath the doors. Vanity plates at the front and rear read **NTSHADE**.

"Nice car, James..." I say as I open the passenger side door to get in. "Is Alice Cooper just letting you borrow it, or did you actually buy it from him?"

"We can't all cruise around in those hillbilly mountain-taxis like you, my friend," says James, indicating my beat-to-crap yellow Jeep, parked a few spaces over. He puts a key in the ignition and the Corvette's engine throbs to life with a throaty roar. Above it, James shouts: "Triple-Holley-carbed 427... puts out four-hunnerd-an'-thirty-five horses."

"Are you sure you're safe to drive?" I ask him, noticing his slightly slurred speech. "Because I'm definitely not."

"Fuck it. We're not going far. Just up a few hills."

As he backs out of the alley, James stomps on the gas and the Corvette careens in reverse out into the street, where it

nearly runs over a group of raccoons foraging for scraps in the saloon's dumpster. James brakes hard and drops the clutch, peeling rubber in first gear. We hurtle along a back street toward Burton Drive, blowing through the stop sign as James makes a tire-squealing left turn. As he points the Corvette's shark-like nose up a steep road that winds along the side of a dark, pine-covered hill, he turns on the car radio - tuned to KOTR, of course.

"I can't believe it: *Inna-Gadda-Da-Vida*'s still playing!" James laughs and cranks it up, waving his hand like a stoned orchestra conductor. He'd put on the notoriously lengthy Iron Butterfly song right after I'd shown up, so he could leave the radio station early. It was an old DJ trick - great for bathroom breaks - and some other KOTR DJ was apparently making use of it again.

"So how 'bout that Rina chick?" James conversationally yells above the wind and the bombastic guitar riffs. "I sure wouldn't mind being the bear in that screwball porn movie of hers. Damn, she's hot!"

"She looks incredible," I yell back in complete agreement, "but I never trusted her as a kid. Do you remember her dog?"

"Who gives a shit about her dog? Unless... is the dog a porn star, too?"

At the top of the hill, the road levels out and the Corvette's engine settles into a low rumble. James turns down the radio as I say:

"I'm talking about her dog, Raymundo. That brown Doberman I saw - or thought I saw - getting murdered in Doctor Smiley's backyard when I was a seven. I told you about that, right?"

"You did: in Lloyd's Bentley on the way to Esalen. I remember now. Lloyd had you convinced our moms had joined a cult of swingin' suburban Satanists. They were all supposed to be hanging out in the Smileys' backyard drinking dog blood martinis while they practiced their evil black magick. But hey, it was the seventies... free love, bad acid, Charlie Manson... hell, even Sammy Davis Jr. was into Satanism back then."

"Freaky, right?"

"Freaky that you were gullible enough to believe our moms were dog-blood-chugging Satanists? Or freaky that Rina showed up in Cambria on the same day you did?"

"Both, I guess... and it's freaky I ran into you again, too, after all these years. That's just way too many weird coincidences for one day. If stuff like that happened in a novel, nobody'd ever believe it."

James spouts the old cliché: "Truth is stranger than fiction, dude."

"Not all the time," I feel compelled to argue.

The Corvette rolls to a halt at the intersection of Burton Drive and the highway; James has magnanimously decided to heed the stop sign this time. As the engine idles, he turns to me and explains: "As coincidences go, this is all pretty minor.... Look, I live here because Lloyd made me a shitpile of money in the stock market after I got my insurance settlement and I started thinking it was time to buy some real estate. When I asked him where I should live, he told me the usual stuff about Paris, New York, London, *blah blah blah*... but then he said I should check out Cambria. He said the weather was great, it has the forests and the beach, and houses here are way underpriced compared to other places

like San Diego or Monterey. Plus, it's like the new getaway destination for people from Kingsburg. It's pretty much a straight shot on Highway 41 over to the coast; three-and-a-half hours and you're there. That's probably why Rina's folks live close by. And remember, they moved here when she was in the fourth grade. So rather than a series of 'stunning coincidences,' it's more like just your ordinary, everyday bullshit. The only really out-of-the-ordinary thing is that you finally decided to get off your ass and leave Esalen."

A question occurs to me that I should have asked earlier: "Did you know I was up at Esalen the whole time?"

"Sure, Lloyd told me - but he also told me to leave you alone for a while. He didn't want me distracting you while your brain was getting rewired, or whatever. He said you'd find me when you were ready... with your goofy remote viewing weirdness."

"All I did was listen to the radio."

"All I know is you found me, just like Lloyd said you would."

As I mull that over, I say idly: "My parents used to have a weekend cabin in Morro Bay. That's what, maybe fifteen minutes from here?"

"Depends on how fast you drive," James says, flooring the accelerator. "It's about twenty miles south."

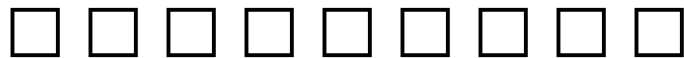
The Corvette is heading north. Rapidly.

"I just wanna show you what this baby can do!" James shouts as we hurtle through the night with the Corvette's high beams lighting up a corridor of dark and twisted trees lining the highway ahead of us. The engine's roar becomes a solid wall of noise, louder than anything I've ever heard.

The added g-force is pushing me back in my seat. With some effort, I lean over and look at the speedometer. It's already climbing past 100 mph.

Before I can complete the vision of my impending death in a body-shredding hail of shattered fiberglass, lethally spinning vanity license plates, and triple-Holley-carburetor shrapnel, James is already braking for a turn. He pulls in at the northern end of Cambria's Main Street and starts snaking the Corvette up the side of another hill, illuminated this time by the yellow and red-orange lights of a huge gas station sign spelling out the word **SHELL** in square block letters at the top of a tall pole visible from the highway.

"I've got one more 'coincidence' coming up for you," says James, as he steers the Corvette into a tight hairpin turn. "When you see who it is, I swear, you'll think you're hallucinating."



"Honey, I'm home!"

James shouts the greeting from the Corvette's open cockpit in a perfect imitation of axe-wielding Jack Nicholson's famous door-bashing moment in Stanley Kubrick's filmed adaptation of *The Shining*. I'm almost disappointed not to hear Shelley Duvall's accompanying shrieks.

Home, for James, is a multi-story cedar-shingled tree house at the top of a steep forested canyon. It's built around a huge, gnarly Monterey pine that looks like a centuries-old bonsai tree blown up to Godzilla-sized heights, with sea-green pressure-treated pier pilings supporting the structure from below. Orange- and honey-

hued stained glass windows glimmer in the darkness beneath wispy beards of Spanish moss, which dangle from the slanted copper roofline. On the uppermost floor, level with the street, two California live oaks anchor the front of a long, wide deck of wooden planks, where James has parked his car next to a plum-colored Porsche 911. The deck juts out like a drawbridge over a piney abyss, leading to the cedar-soffited main house and vertigo-inducing balconies with railings made of varnished Manzanita branches lashed together by old hemp rope. The overall design is whimsical in the extreme. It's like an enormous birdhouse built for a flock of sybaritic pterodactyls.

The front door has been fashioned from a huge slab of redwood burl with its natural edges still intact. A brass ship's portal has been set into it at eye-level. James grasps a silver-plated handle in the sinuous shape of a Chinese water dragon and opens the door for me. As we head inside, he shouts like a cheery homicidal maniac:

"Heeeeere's Jimmy!"

From the patchouli-scented foyer, we descend a bird's-eye maple spiral staircase into a great room with a double-height cathedral ceiling and Pacific Northwest hunting lodge affectations: moose antler chandeliers, bearskin rugs, and deerskin drums painted with the totemic faces of coyotes and ravens. Pendleton blankets are artfully draped across the back of a handcrafted driftwood-and-leather couch. Tall atrium windows overlook the canyon, the black ribbon of highway, and the infinite, moonlit ocean just beyond. It's a spectacular view, marred only by the Shell station sign we passed earlier, which – though set at an oblique angle – is almost level with the windows and only a

few hundred yards out. It illuminates the room with a jaundiced yellow glow.

“Fucking Shell sign...” James grumbles. “If I dynamited that thing my property value would shoot up by at least a hundred grand.”

“Still, it’s a pretty nice view,” I say.

“Not bad, but the best view’s over here, in the kitchen.”

I notice a low, redwood slab table already set for dinner. Three oil lamps with wicks afloat in ruby-tinted oil illuminate the spread. There’s an artfully glazed ceramic platter layered with slices of cheese, prosciutto, and salami; a small white bowl heaped with fragrant, herb-seasoned olives; a dish of hummus garnished with crushed sun-dried tomatoes; and a bamboo cutting board displaying round slices of cucumber, ripe figs, and a crusty French baguette.

In the kitchen, a woman with long, wavy red hair is bending over in front of a six-burner Viking stove to pull a rack of glazed lamb ribs from the oven. James blatantly gawks at the perfect curves of her backside in her tight, faded jeans and says: “Now *that’s* the view I was talkin’ about.”

Feeling shy, I only take in a quick, sideways glance, but that’s enough to rouse the amoral lust-monkey in me. Her ass is, in a word, devastating.

James – *that lucky bastard* – says: “Shake it, baby.”

With her back still turned to us, the mystery woman (*Frankie?*) gives her hips a friendly wag and says, “I hope you brought the wine like I asked you to.”

“Oh shit!” says James, who apparently forgot.

I'm thinking the same thing - *Oh shit!* - because now I know who the red-headed woman is:

Her name is Francesca and she happens to be the first girl I ever kissed. She also might have been the first girl I had sex with - if James hadn't stolen her from me.

As Francesca sets the rack of lamb on the kitchen counter, James wraps his arms around her from behind and makes an elaborate show of kissing her neck. Francesca squirms around and instantly recognizes me, standing over by the doorway.

"Oh my god! Gordon, is that you?"

"Francesca?"

"Yes! *God...* it's so great to see you after all these years!"

She breaks away and gives me the kiss that James had been expecting.

Her lips send me plummeting into a Proustian flashback of sensual ecstasy. Francesca smells wonderfully of patchouli and her mouth tastes like a sweet, delicious plum on a sun-shot summer afternoon. I remember her mouth tasting *exactly that same way* during our first kiss, treading water in the cold, dark waters of Dinkey Creek after a midnight cliff-diving dare executed in front of a gang of Hells Angels.

I had ended up at Dinkey Creek because Jimmy's parents had invited me to go along with them on a camping trip right after my father's funeral. Jimmy and I had been sharing a tent at night and spending our days fishing for trout in the creek. One day, after catching ten fish apiece, we'd shared some of our trout bounty with an amiable Hells Angel named MacDuff, who'd returned the favor by inviting us to a party at a local pool hall, where we'd been introduced to Francesca.

For me – and for Jimmy, too, apparently – it had been instant infatuation when Francesca first showed up in her leopard skin bikini top, flashing us a witchy grin from under all that glorious, unruly red hair of hers. Jimmy and I were only thirteen at the time, barely into puberty. Francesca was the older woman, a worldly-wise fifteen. We ended up getting drunk and stoned together. And then, somehow, it was midnight and we were all standing around in the moonlight at the edge of a tall cliff. Jimmy wondered aloud if anyone had ever jumped off the cliff and lived.

“I’ll do it, if you do it,” Francesca said to me, peering over the cliff’s edge into the inky black ribbon of creek water some ninety feet below. The Hells Angels were making jokes in the background about a virgin sacrifice. Teenage bravado compelled me to say, “Sure, you go first.” I didn’t think she’d do it – *no one could be that crazy* – but she actually did. A little bunny hop and she was gone. A long moment passed and then there was a tiny splash. Francesca’s thin voice called up to tell me the water was just fine.

I discovered that hell wasn’t such a warm place, after all....

There was no backing down in front of all those Hells Angels. So I jumped, too. The panic that rushed through me while I was plummeting felt like a glimpse of my soul leaving my body at the moment of death. The confusion that overwhelmed me when I hit the water very nearly resulted in my drowning. Then my foot touched gravel and I reflexively pushed myself up. When I broke the water’s surface in a surge of icy bubbles, I felt reborn, triumphant, filled with vital good health.

Just before she swam over to kiss me, Francesca held up her hands as if describing a smallish fish that got away. “You

missed the boulders by this much," she told me. I didn't care. The ensuing tongue-action made my near-suicidal plunge seem completely worthwhile.

As Francesca's lips pull away from mine back in the kitchen, my thoughts turn to a related topic: In 1987, the writer Colin Wilson stopped by Esalen to give a lecture on Gurdjieff, sex, and human consciousness. I heard Wilson tell the audience that the physical act of sex is basically a confidence trick – never as good as anyone imagines it can be. But sex with an overlay of love, or obsession, can put us into a state of *focused attention* – or what Wilson called 'holiday consciousness' – which makes the whole world seem fascinating and alive with sexy goodness. So sex, and the pursuit of sex, can thereby free us from our habitual, automatic thought patterns and our mechanistic way of living. Sex, deliberately amplified by the imagination, can take us beyond the 'triviality of everydayness' and its accompanying ontological despair. It can wake us from the sleepwalking existence that, according to Gurdjieff, turns almost all human beings into machines.

That was certainly true for me: I'd never felt so alive as when I was getting that first kiss from Francesca.

But it ended badly, of course.

"I'm surprised you still remember me," I say, feeling a twinge of remorse as Francesca breaks our embrace, the soft warmth of her receding from my chest.

"A girl never forgets the first guy who's willing to jump off a cliff for her." Turning to James, she says, "How come you never jumped off a cliff for me, huh?"

"You know that old Mom saying, 'If your friends jump off a cliff, does that mean you have to do it, too?' Well, call me

crazy, but I always thought the right answer was 'No.' Anyway, things worked out just fine for me in the end."

There was no disputing that.

Right after that first kiss - after we'd climbed out of the creek, shivering and soaking wet - I'd invited Francesca to my tent to dry off, hoping we could continue our erotic explorations. I assured her that Jimmy wouldn't be there; Jimmy, I knew, would be much more inclined to stick around with the Hells Angels, drinking beer and laughing at us from the top of the cliff. To my unspoken amazement, Francesca took me up on my lewd offer, and soon we were both naked inside my sleeping bag, lighting up a spliff.

"Careful with that..." Francesca warned me, as I inhaled deeply, hoping to impress, "it's opiated Thai stick." *Too late.* Francesca soon found her five outstretched fingers dripping with the pearls of my astonishment as I was sucked into the vortex of a singularly massive headrush. I let out a belching groan, like a brutally wounded sea lion. Then, with strange diligence, I made our romantic rendezvous even more memorable by effusively puking in Francesca's hair.

I passed out at that point, likely from chagrin. When my flayed consciousness resurfaced, I discovered Jimmy and Francesca going at it like amateur porn stars in the next sleeping bag over. I swore to myself then to become Jimmy's lifelong enemy, but I later realized that, had the situation been reversed, I would have done exactly the same thing. The prospect of making love to Francesca had seemed worth betraying any juvenile friendship.

So Jimmy (now James) had been forgiven - yet again.

“So what’s the deal?” I ask. “Have you guys been together ever since Dinkey Creek?”

“We sort of stayed in touch,” says James.

“Hardly,” Francesca contradicts him. “We didn’t really hook up again until Jimmy’s uncle tracked me down for him a few years ago.”

“Good ol’ Uncle Lloyd,” I say, “super-secret black-ops bagman for the medico-military-occult complex... and matchmaker.”

“It’s been true love ever since,” says James.

“Well, I wouldn’t go *that* far...” Francesca demurs.

“Okay, so we’ve just had lots of really sweaty sex. But dude, we’re married! Can you believe it?”

It would be less painful not to believe it, but it seems I have no choice.



BROWNIE POINTS

All during dinner and right up through dessert, I keep envisioning Francesca in a variety of Indian maiden poses: Francesca washing her long red hair under a waterfall while being shyly observed by deer and raccoons; Francesca scrubbing her buckskin miniskirt beside a rocky stream as jackrabbits and bluebirds gaze upon her from a bower of wildflowers; Francesca inside a patchouli-scented tepee, offering me a peace pipe packed to the brim with opiated Thai stick while a raven hops about on the bearskin blankets croaking “Nevermore....”

That Pacific Northwest hunting lodge theme is really getting to me.

“Francesca, these brownies are awesome,” I say as I reach across the redwood table to help myself to another – my third.

My hand stops in mid-air as Francesca says, “Yeah, about those brownies....”

“Hey, did Frankie happen to mention that she’s a witch?” James asks, interrupting her. He takes another brownie for himself and gestures for me to do the same.

I vaguely remember a snatch of drunken conversation alluding to Francesca’s interest in witchcraft back when we met at Dinkey Creek. We seem to be just as drunk this time around (two six-packs of beer have accompanied our meal), although we’re older now and, presumably, wiser.

"I'm a Wiccan," Francesca corrects James. "There's a difference."

"Yeah, the Wiccans are more into politics," James informs me. "They actually get out and vote."

"I wish I'd known. I would've brought along my broom as a show of solidarity."

Francesca grins. "We don't actually fly around on brooms – "

"– anymore..." James appends. "But I read somewhere that in the old days witches used to rub their broomsticks with this special hallucinogenic ointment made out of mandrake root. Then they'd go out in the woods at night and take off all their clothes and ride around on the brooms like they were hobbyhorses. The ointment would get absorbed by their pussy lips, or assholes, or whatever, and pretty soon they'd be trippin' out, thinking they were really flying." He turns to me. "Or maybe it was succubus-style astral traveling, like you talked about in your lecture. Anyway, I've been asking Frankie to try it with her coven, but so far she won't go for it."

"He just wants to get pictures of me and my friends naked."

"With brooms between your legs. It'd be so great! I could be like the Robert Mapplethorpe or Sally Mann for naked witch chicks. You should see some of Frankie's Wiccan friends... they're totally hot. I'd make a fucking fortune selling the photographs in art galleries."

"I never knew you had such a sensitive artist's soul, James," I say.

"Blow me, Crash. You might get some nooky with your fancy Esalen talk about Loosh and soul-sucking

moonbeams, or whatever, but when all the sexy witch girls start begging me to make them famous with my pictures, then we'll see who's the bigger, badder wizard."

"You couldn't handle being a wizard, James," says Francesca. "The first spell you'd try to cast would be for a bigger penis. Only you'd get drunk and fuck it up - and the next thing you know, your dick'd be sliding down your leg like a rotten banana."

"Like you're so much better! Tell Crash about your 'Bringing Down the Moon' ceremony, Frankie. He'll love that."

"No way. I can already see where this is going."

James tells me: "Every full moon they go out in the woods and strip naked. They've all got these silver platters... and they make a big circle holding the platters above their heads, pointing up at the moon. Then they start chanting and doing this weird, Camp-Hialeah-Gitchee-Goomee hula thing until the moon has an orgasm. It's supposed to help with their PMS."

"James, you shitweasel! That's not how it goes!"

I almost fall off my chair as I double over, laughing way too hard. I know I must look semi-hysterical, but I can't seem to control it. James is laughing, too, and his face is starting to look incredibly weird to me. *Keep it together...* I tell myself. But the laughter doesn't stop until I'm completely out of breath.

"Man, what's in those brownies?" I ask, gasping.

"I'm not really sure," Francesca admits. "One of my friends made them for me."

"One of your witch friends?" James asks her.

"Yeah... Kayleigh. You know her."

"Biggest stoner witch in Cambria," James tells me. "There's pot in those brownies, for sure."

"I wouldn't be surprised." Francesca seems unconcerned.

"Maybe even LSD."

"Or mandrake root," I suggest ominously, before cracking up again.

"Laugh all you want now, Crash, but you won't be laughing so hard when the peyote kicks in and your hands turn into poisonous cactus tentacles and the sky starts raining green Mexican goat vomit."

"How'd you know the goat vomit was Mexican? Is it happening to you, too?"

"No, but it could. You have no idea what a head-trip this Kayleigh chick is.... She's a full-on druggonaut - a psychedelic explorer. Her uncle's Buckminster Fuller, if that means anything to you."

"The geodesic dome guy. No shit?"

Francesca breaks in: "I think you'd really like her, Gordon. She has all these wild stories that always start out with..." here Francesca squints her eyes and tokes on an imaginary roach, talking in a low, feminine croak with an Appalachian lilt to it: "'Uncle Bucky... what a tripster....'"

"Plus, she has a nice set of tits," adds James.

"Call her up," I say.

"I don't know if she'll come. It's starting to rain," Francesca says. "But I'll call her, anyway."

I look up and see big globular raindrops, thick as honey, splattering against the atrium windows. I hadn't even noticed until Francesca mentioned it.

"I better go put the top up on the 'Vette," says James. After he disappears up the spiral staircase, I start helping Francesca clear the dishes.

"So Gordon..." she says to me in the kitchen, "you know to be careful around James, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm not sure how to put it, exactly. Let's just say that James has a serious dark side."

"Oh, I knew that already, believe me..." I say as I scrape a pile of greasy gnawed lamb bones into the garbage can under the sink.

"Yeah, but maybe not in the way I'm thinking. I know James is an old friend of yours, so I don't want to say too much, but lately, I've been starting to think he's dangerous."

"Dangerous how?"

"I don't know... it's like he has two people living inside him. James and his shadow - or Shady Jim, as I've come to think of him. Shady Jim is the dangerous one. Dangerous to other people - and also maybe dangerous to James."

"Okay, so I'll be on the lookout for Shady Jim."

"I'm not kidding, Gordon. Be careful. Just between you and me, I've been trying to figure out a way to divorce him, but I'm kind of scared to do it. I worry that it might set him off."

"Look, I know James is sarcastic as hell and he can be kind of an asshole, but he's such a happy-go-lucky asshole that most of the time he's fun to be around."

"He is... most of the time... and that's what I love about him. But at other times he scares the crap out of me. His

rage gets away from him. Stick around long enough and you'll see what I mean."

Francesca's red hair blazes in the light from the stainless steel range hood above the Viking stove. It occurs to me that I'm falling in love with her all over again. I wonder if it would be inappropriate to kiss her, or to pull down her faded jeans and create a fluttery sensation with my tongue around her *labia minora*. Then, with a flicker of moral clarity, I realize that yes, within this particular context, such behavior might be considered out-of-bounds. Reprehensible, even.

Tough titty for you, Crash... as James might say.

We hear him coming back down the staircase and go to meet him in the great room.

"Did Crash try sticking his tongue down your throat while I was gone?" asks James.

What is he, a mind reader?

"He helped me clean up the dishes," says Francesca. "Which I can't say you've ever done."

"Suck-up," James says to me. "That girly work will make your testicles shrink."

"I know. As soon as I scraped off the first plate, I felt my cremaster muscle twitch and then my balls hiked up into my scrotum like the landing gear on a 747."

"Here: this'll make your balls hang loose again," Francesca says, handing me a fresh bottle of beer. "You might end up needing them later. I'm about to go call Kayleigh...."



I'm seated in a leather wingback chair in the candlelit great room with my eyes half-shut - trying to ride out a reality-shredding headrush. I find the darkness soothing... the conversation, less so. There's a steady, crystalline humming in my ears and everyone's words, including my own, drift in and out of audibility as if they issue from a chorus of séance-summoned ghosts:

"Ohgodohgodohgod I'm so high...."

"There must've been LSD in those brownies."

"'Tweren't no such thing. I only mixed in a couple peyote buttons."

"Oh crap - here comes the green Mexican goat vomit."

"Kayleigh, you bitch! You drugged us with mescaline?"

"I'm just kiddin'. Lighten up, you big baby. All's I put in there was the shake from that polio weed I got from Skeeze the other day."

"Fucking Skeeze! That pot could be laced with anything! I think he's working undercover for the CIA."

"Yeah, and the Rat Castle's one o' them top secret MKULTRA labs, right?"

"You don't know...."

"Oh hush! Skeeze is cool. His brain might be a little tweaked, but his weed's good."

"And I'm telling you the dude is CIA. You know that UFO story he always tells everybody? Maybe it's just a cover."

"A cover for what? So the CIA can spy on a terrorist network o' burnt out surfer dudes who go around sayin' they got butt-raped by aliens?"

"You don't know...."

"Get off it, James. The pot's jus' makin' you paranoid."

“Why would the aliens force him to gargle their glow-in-the-dark semen, anyway?”

“Who said Skeeze was garglin’ alien semen?”

“Skeeze did! He told me about it in Camozzi’s a few weeks ago while we were doing tequila shots.”

“You drink with the guy, but you don’t trust his weed?”

“He gargled alien semen. You can never trust a guy after that. He’s not even sure if he’s still attracted to women.”

“I think you’re jus’ makin’ that shit up.”

“And I think you put LSD in those brownies! Crash, can you feel it? I’m bitch-slapping you right now with my LSD mind powers.”

“I don’t feel anything.”

“You will.”



Whatever was in Kayleigh’s brownies, it sure got us wasted.

By around three in the morning, I can finally feel myself starting to come down, but James has been drinking straight from a bottle of vodka and he’s still going strong. He’s standing up on the coffee table, going off on a manic rant about how the concept of Loosh intersects with the collected works of H.P. Lovecraft – something about how “gibbering abominations from beyond the stars” have been sucking up Loosh through a galaxy-wide straw.

An autumn storm is raging outside: rain, thunder, lightning, hail – the works. It has the wind-lashed ferocity of a perilous typhoon in a dream. Kayleigh and Francesca are

kicking back on the driftwood couch with a Pendleton blanket across their laps, sharing a joint and laughing as they call bullshit on James and his accursed philosophy. He takes umbrage, claiming he's been an expert in all things Lovecraftian practically from birth:

"Soon after I was born," he says portentously, "my unwed mother gave me a Cthulhu plush toy, which she'd hand-sewn from squamous polyester after a series of baleful dreams at her split-level ranch house in the nightmare corpse-city of R'lyeh, Ohio."

"Ohio? Whatever happened to the eldritch horrors of Kingsburg, California?" I ask James.

"We arrived in Kingsburg before my second birthday, commanded by the will of the Azathoth - or maybe it was Yog-Sothoth... I forget which." James shrugs. "I was just a kid."

"That's understandable. As a two-year-old, you were probably still shitting your pants... with eldritch horror," Francesca says.

Kayleigh laughs - a warm trill. It's a beautiful sound from a beautiful girl. She has sky blue eyes, a pert little nose, and full, sensual lips. Her long blonde hair is parted down the middle and pulled back into a loose ponytail. In her black Danskin top and long paisley skirt, she looks the part of the classic hippie girl. Goddessy without being intimidating.

And James was right: Kayleigh has a nice set of tits. About the nicest I've ever seen on a girl so slender.

Since her arrival, all the pent-up sexual attraction I'd felt for Francesca has been shifting over to Kayleigh. Once I got past my brownie-induced headrush, I started flirting with her almost non-stop. It didn't take her long to start flirting

back. I feel somewhat guilty for being so fickle (*Am I a hopeless horndog, or what?*), but it's definitely a better arrangement for all concerned. Unlike Francesca, Kayleigh isn't married to my best friend.

"Hey Gordon, whyn't you come sit yourself down b'tween me an' Francesca," Kayleigh says, waving me over. "We got us a better view of James an' his pompous H.P. Lovecrafty bullcrap from over here."

Kayleigh's Appalachian dialect seems to get more pronounced when she's stoned. I'm finding it kind of sexy. I go right over and snuggle down under the Pendleton blanket with her.

Total bliss.

Then I feel a hand groping my crotch. *Even better!*

"Just so you know, I paid six-hundred-dollars for that blanket, so don't even *think* about giving Crash a handjob under there," says James.

Kayleigh yanks her hands out from under the blanket and folds them primly on top of it, like a Catholic schoolgirl who's just seen her best friend's knuckles getting rapped by a sadistic head nun.

"Cock-blocker," I grumble at James.

"Pervert," James sneers back at me. "That's my wife sitting right next you, in case you hadn't noticed."

Francesca also yanks her hands out from under the blanket and assumes the same overtly pious expression as Kayleigh, until they both start cracking up.

"So. About H.P. Lovecraft..." I say.

"What about him?" says James.

“He was kind of a cock-blocker, too, wouldn’t you say? Or more like a soul-blocker. Think about it: Lovecraft is the master storyteller of anti-Gnosis.”

“What’s anti-Gnosis? Is that even a real word?”

“You know what I mean.... Instead of seeking Gnosis – spiritual knowledge that liberates people from the trap of the material world by connecting them to the Divine Spark within – Lovecraft’s protagonists usually end up finding anti-Gnosis: forbidden knowledge of a hostile alien universe lurking beneath the thin veneer of the material world, knowledge that either enslaves them to harsh inhuman gods or drives them insane.”

“Gordon, honey...” Kayleigh breathes into my ear, “I love the way y’all talk, but I’m ‘bout ready to pass out. You mind if I rest my head here awhile?”

I tell her that would be fine as she lays her head on my shoulder and closes her beautiful blue eyes.

“We have a spare bedroom that Kayleigh usually sleeps in when we party like this,” Francesca says to me, “although I was thinking we’d put you in there tonight. I guess you’ll get the couch.”

Without opening her eyes, Kayleigh murmurs: “Nahhh... we can share the bed. It’s okay by me.” She pats my crotch with a sly, sleepy grin.

“Anti-Gnosis... that’s cute,” says James, ignoring my sudden good fortune (and its accompanying erection). “You’re talking about my literary hero there.”

“I can’t help it if Lovecraft’s a spiritual scumbag.”

“But what if he’s right?”

“Right, like how?” I ask James. “Like Cthulhu really exists? Like he sits on the board of Goldman Sachs and devours souls out in the Hamptons on weekends?”

“No. I mean, what if, like Lovecraft wrote, it’s the ‘gods of the outer hells that guard the feeble gods of earth.’ What if they’re the more powerful ones, the ones that are really in charge? What then, Loosh-Boy?”

“Then I guess we’re toast.”

“Exactly.”

“It’s not a very easy thesis to prove, of course.”

“Oh yeah? Watch me.”

James crudely drops his pants to the accompaniment of a well-timed thunderclap, as if Nature is colluding with him on the show he intends to put on for us. We hear a tree crack and go crashing to the forest floor somewhere in the distance. Moments later, the power goes out.

“Typical,” Francesca says, nonchalantly lighting a few nearby candles.

“You mean the power goes out every time James takes off his pants like that?” I ask her.

“Almost,” she answers with a laugh.

The light from the candles and the Shell station sign behind James makes the room bright enough for us to see him throwing off the rest of his clothes in silhouette.

“James, what the hell are you doing?” his wife asks him.

He starts dancing around on top of the coffee table like James Brown at the Apollo Theater – only naked (and extremely pale). “I’m about to show you there’s no magic in the world. No loving, all-powerful God that gives a rat’s ass about you, me, or anyone else.” He’s actually not a bad

dancer. "The only real power is the White Male Patriarchy. And I'm it, baby.... So you should just smile and get down on your knees and *blow me!*"

Francesca looks up at James tolerantly, the way a mother might look at her disturbed child. "I think I'll pass," she says. Then she whispers, just to me: "Say hello to Shady Jim...."

James lifts his arms up toward the heavens and loudly proclaims: "If there's a Jesus, like the Christians believe in, I challenge Him to strike me down right here and now. C'mon, zap my skinny white ass with a bolt of lightning, Jesus, I dare you! Do it now, if you've got any hair on your holy nuts at all. C'mon, strike me the fuck down!"

Lightning flashes in the atrium windows at that moment, but it's very far off. Another clap of thunder follows it a few moments later. Torrents of rainwater pry at the cedar shingles outside, as if seeking a way in.

"You're being an asshole," Francesca says, stating the obvious.

"I'm proving a point!" shouts James. "Okay, Buddha then.... C'mon, Buddha, you big Zen wuss. Strike me down. Send a spiritual samurai to make sushi from my soul. You like the alliteration? No, huh? Well, okay then, how about Mohammad? Slap me down, Mohammad! C'mon, pretend I'm Salman Rushdie! You know you wanna do it!"

Nothing.

"Try Odin," I suggest. "A Norse god might be up for it. They don't have much to do these days."

"Okay, Odin, c'mon you crusty old fuck. Strike me down. Do it to me! Do it for the Vikings!"

Lightning strikes again, illuminating the entire room. The thunder sounds like it's right on top of us this time. The timing is almost comical, but James is still among the living.

"No, huh? Well, you're all pussies! Jesus, Buddha... you especially make me sick. What do I have to do to get a little action around here? *Ooh*, I know! I'll call on the Outer Gods!" James makes some hokey ghost noises: "*Wwhroooooo-hoo-hoo-hooo!* I'm calling on Azathoth, the 'Blind Idiot God,' who holds court at the center of the universe. Yog-Sothoth, the 'All-in-One.' And Nyarlathotep, the 'Crawling Chaos.' Hell, send all the demons available! And let them destroy me in the usual way: by giving me what I want!"

There's a lull in the storm, rather than the climactic clash of thunder and lightning I'd been expecting. In a quiet voice I say, "So what do you want, Jimmy-Toad? A pony?"

"I wanna be rich and famous, goddamit! I want the nineties to be the James Marrsden Decade!"

With that, James leaps off the table and lopez across the room to a sliding glass door that opens onto the back balcony. There's something ape-like in his gait. I watch, amused, as he plunges into the rain and climbs up on the balcony's manzanita railing. The raindrops outside the open doorway fall harder and faster until they reach an incredible crescendo – the sound of rocks pouring down a cement truck chute. James bellows under the deluge like King Kong swatting biplanes from the top of the Empire State Building.

Francesca yells after him: "James, you idiot, you're screwing around with forces you don't understand! You're putting us all at risk!"

“GIVE ME WHAT I WANT!” he screams into the night.

I turn to Francesca. “I can see now why he might’ve wanted to cast that spell for a bigger penis.”

“Believe me, I was tempted to do it myself.”

As James drunkenly sways on top of the railing, a silvery liquid lariat loops out from his crotch. He’s pissing at the moon. “GIVE ME WHAT I WANT!” he yells one more time. Then, with a tremendous thunderclap and a flash of blue-white lightning, he yelps and disappears off the balcony.

“Wow,” I say, “do you think God really took him out?”

“It’s more likely he fell in the bushes.” Francesca sighs. “C’mon... let’s go see if he’s still alive.”

OBE-111: THE DARK BROTHERHOOD, AN OVERVIEW

Summoning demons is never a good idea. The Dark Brotherhood is always looking for new recruits, but drawing its attention can make your life hell - or hell for those around you. Admittance into the Dark Brotherhood is never a sure thing (you might not have enough evil in you), but even if you're deemed worthy of becoming a Dark Brother, you still haven't got it made. While we admit the Dark Brotherhood can offer some great temporal benefits, like fame and fortune, we would also point out that in the long run its overseers, the Archons, rarely keep their bargains. And their astral retirement plan truly sucks.

Human beings have free will (sort-of...). That's the beauty and danger of physical incarnation on Earth: You can choose sides. Even if you've had one damned incarnation after another as a stooge for the Archons in the Dark Brotherhood, there's always a chance that during your next incarnation you'll choose differently. It's unlikely - thieves tend to reincarnate as better thieves and saints usually return as more enlightened saints - but it does happen. Most people just muddle along somewhere in the middle, never choosing. Which is fine, because... well, let's not get into the Ultimate Truth just yet. It's confusing, even for us.

Basically, the way you choose comes down to this: If you consistently put your own selfish interests ahead of the collective good, then your path leads to the Dark

Brotherhood. If you sometimes – not even always – put others first, then you’re heading toward the Brotherhood of Light.

Some of us in the Invisible College have a shorthand way of referencing those two orientations: Service To Self (STS) and Service To Others (STO). From our vantage point, the Earth is considered a predominantly STS-oriented world.

But you already knew that, right?

Human history is a history of war, exploitation, and cruelty. Like the magicians in some dispiriting Brothers Grimm fairy tale, a relatively small number of people have always seemed superior to the rest because they could spin gold out of human suffering. These days we know them as the owners and chief executive officers of totalitarian institutions like the multinational energy, technology, media, finance, and pharmaceutical corporations. They award themselves enormous salaries and year-end bonuses while paying their employees a pittance in comparison. Almost to a man, they belong to the Dark Brotherhood.

The members of the Dark Brotherhood function like bellwethers to the rest of humanity – or as superior slaves directing lesser slaves in accordance with instructions received from the Archons. (That’s a paraphrase of Charles Fort’s insightful observation from The Book of the Damned, published in 1919, just so you know... the Invisible College has always had the ear of a select number of opposing humans in the Brotherhood of Light.)

The easiest way to recognize a Dark Brother is by his or her need for control. The Dark Brotherhood is collectively obsessed with controlling others. Think of Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, and Pol Pot. If the Dark Brotherhood gets its way, every person on Earth will soon be microchipped and

tracked by GPS while their every phone conversation and electronic text message is captured, stored, and subjected to high-speed data analysis by enormous arrays of supercomputers – which will make everyone vulnerable to having their bank accounts frozen and their employment terminated with just a few keystrokes. Political dissidents will be prosecuted and tortured for trumped-up crimes they can't possibly defend themselves against. It will make George Orwell's dystopian novel, 1984, look like a Girl Scout Jamboree.

This need for control is ironic considering that, as a general rule, the more power and influence a Dark Brother wields on Earth, the less free will he possesses to do anything other than what the Archons require of him. A Hitler or a Pol Pot is little more than a hollowed-out mechanical zombie, his every thought and action transdimensionally dictated by a bloodthirsty Archon ringmaster in the nightmare circus of warfare.

Religion, nationalism, war, and government debt are the primary instruments of control used by the Archons and the Dark Brotherhood in their ongoing efforts to enslave mankind.

Consider this: Institutional religion is generally believed to bring people closer to God and elevate their minds, but it has a historic record of restricting free thought, encouraging fanaticism, and inciting war. The Catholic Church, with its history of crusades and inquisitions, is the most glaring example, but almost every monotheistic religion has been used for the same regressive ends. Religious wars are almost always about whose god is the One and Only True God, but only False Gods – the Archons – require people to be maimed and slaughtered and raped

on their behalf. War, it should be remembered, is an excellent source of Loosh.

Nationalism, much like religion, has been used throughout history to set one large population of believers ("patriots") against another. Often, a supposedly neutral third party incites those wars between nations. Prior to the American Revolution, for example, France sent agents provocateurs (Gallic Dark Brothers) to America to whip up colonial resentment against the British crown.

It's also known that Wall Street capitalists provided crucial support to Lenin and Trotsky for the Russian Revolution of 1917, illegally funneling gold bullion to the Bolsheviks despite the fact that American troops were in Russia trying to prop up the pro-democracy Mensheviks. After having lived in exile in Western Europe for ten years, Lenin was transported - along with 150 trained revolutionaries and at least five million dollars in gold - "in a Sealed Train like a plague bacillus from Switzerland to Russia" in the words of Sir Winston Churchill. The man responsible for that train's safe passage through war-torn Germany was Max Warburg, head of the Rothschild-affiliated private investment bank, M. M. Warburg & Co., in Hamburg, and brother of Paul Warburg, the chief architect of the U.S. Federal Reserve System. From America, Jacob Schiff and Senator Elihu Root kicked in approximately \$20 million each for the Bolshevik cause. At the time, Schiff and Root were both associated with the Wall Street investment firm Kuhn, Loeb & Company - as was Paul Warburg, who had worked there and married founder Solomon Loeb's daughter, Nina, in 1895.

Why would Wall Street capitalists (those at Kuhn, Loeb & Company in particular) want to support communist

revolutionaries, you might ask? The two parties would seem to have antithetical views. But men like the Warburgs, the Rothschilds, the Rockefellers, Jacob Schiff, George Herbert Walker, and W. Averell Harriman knew that if they financed communism, they would control it. That's why some of those same men financed the Nazis, as well.

For the Dark Brotherhood, the issuance of debt is the ultimate means of control. Paul Warburg's creation, the Federal Reserve, and all other central banking systems exist so that a small financial elite can control the world economy. They do this by putting governments into debt. One of the quickest ways to get a government to take on debt, of course, is to foment wars and revolutions, with their ramped-up military spending. Once a central bank has become a government's major creditor, those controlling the central bank can continuously hold that government hostage. The squeezed government, in turn, has no option but to hold its own citizens economically hostage, raising their taxes while the central bank whipsaws them for gigantic profits from pre-engineered bouts of inflation and deflation by jacking around with monetary policy. Debt makes slaves of everyone. Free will is curtailed when there's no money in the bank and your credit cards are maxed out.

We in the Invisible College and the Brotherhood of Light are proponents of free will – which may be why it so often seems like we're losing the battle against the Dark Brotherhood. Our belief in free will extends even to letting the individual members of the Dark Brotherhood do as they wish. But if you look over the sweep of centuries, you'll see that violence and human suffering have been in a steep decline, with a tipping point occurring sometime around

the Age of Enlightenment. (Sir Francis Bacon and those guys in the Royal Society of London with their ideas about the Invisible College? That was definitely one for our side....)

As a percentage of the world's total population, fewer people in the current era will meet a violent death, or suffer from violence or cruelty at the hands of others, than in any previous period of human existence - despite the technothanatological innovations of the modern military-industrial-intelligence complex. Reason, respect for the rights of others, increased literacy, and the rule of law have served to nudge humanity in the direction of peace and prosperity for all.

For every two steps forward we often have to take one step back, but we're making progress... the Dark Brotherhood be damned.

THE CASE OF THE MISSING COW ANUS

The *Cambria Insurrectionist* has its headquarters on the second floor of a rose-colored Tudor style boutique mall across the street from the Cambria Volunteer Fire Department. Nora Biddle-Whitney's office is way in the back, past the makeshift darkroom and the long rows of glass-topped page layout tables, down the hallway from the advertising manager's office, and around a corner from the kitchen alcove, where a fresh pot of coffee is brewing. Nora gives me a big, lopsided grin when she looks up from her desk and sees me walking toward her open doorway. Then her perceptive blue eyes widen in surprise when she sees James limping a few steps behind me, lugging a brushed aluminum Zero Halliburton suitcase full of camera gear.

"My goodness, James, what happened to your face?"

"I had a little accident while I was summoning demons last night," James deadpans. "Just a few nicks and scratches from Old Nick and Old Scratch."

In fact, last night after Francesca and I found James sprawled facedown and moaning in the myrtle bushes beneath his balcony, we decided to drive him to the Twin Cities Community Hospital in Templeton, where he received a total of 23 stitches – most of them just above the bridge of his nose, in a lightning bolt pattern across his forehead. I'm sure the bride of Frankenstein would have found it quite fetching, but the combination of black stitches on reddened, puckered flesh doesn't do much for me. James refused to

have the wound bandaged. The attending physician tried to assure him that with proper care the scarring would be minimal, but James said a scar was actually preferable. It would serve as a lifelong reminder of his “love tap from Nyarlathotep.”

After that crack, the physician took Francesca aside and asked her if he should be prescribing Thorazine, but Francesca managed to convince him that James was just a semi-educated dickhead with Lovecraftian literary pretensions, rather than a budding schizophrenic.

“Are you sure you’ll be able to work today?” Nora asks him.

“Hell, yes! I’m loaded with painkillers and ready for any journalistic misery you can inflict on us.”

I’m actually the one who shouldn’t be working. I’m suffering from a beer-and-brownie hangover and a skipped night of sleep. I’d much rather be curled up in a warm bed somewhere – preferably with Kayleigh – but the trip to the hospital made me miss that opportunity.

James the Cock-Blocker strikes again (*damn him...*).

“So, Nora, do you have anything special planned for us today?” I ask her.

“Well!” Nora brushes back her silver bangs and rummages through the scattered reporter’s notebooks on her desk, squinting at a few yellow Post-it notes. “I was thinking I’d give you a grand tour of the office and introduce you to our staff, but that can wait. Phil DeSoto just phoned me a few moments ago with a story that seems just right for the two of you. There’s a time constraint, so I’d like you to get right on it.”

“Sounds great!” I say. “Who’s Phil DeSoto?”

"He's a gruff, hard-working rancher."

"He's a psycho Marlboro Man seething with bad attitudes," James elaborates.

"Phil has a history of losing his cattle in some very strange ways," Nora explains. "He just ran across another gruesome example early this morning. I want you to go out there and interview him. I don't want to prejudice you in advance, but he's probably going to tell you that his cows are being deliberately slaughtered - "

"- by Satanists," James fills in for her.

"Well, there you go..." Nora says with a shrug. "That's what Phil seems to believe: a satanic cult has been mutilating his farm animals. And he's been quite vocal about it, I must say... but I'd like you to keep an open mind, Gordon. The true explanation might be more prosaic than anything Phil has imagined."

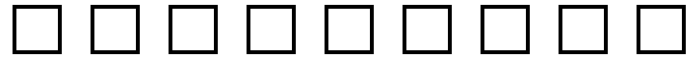
"Just for the record, I was in the emergency room last night, so it couldn't've been me."

"Nobody said it was, James."

"Yeah, but I'm just sayin'...."

Nora peels back a Post-it note from one of her notebooks and hands it to me. "Here's Phil's address. He's already expecting you." She turns to James. "I trust you'll bring back some fabulous photos. Not just of the dead cow. Think of the *mise-en-scène*. A ranch can be a very photogenic place... and ranch hands have faces that are etched with character."

"You got it," says James. Then to me: "Phil lives way up on San Simeon Creek Road on a two-track out past where the pavement ends. We should probably take your Jeep."



Phil DeSoto served us a breakfast of strong black coffee and liver and onions fried in bacon grease before taking us out on horseback to see the Guernsey's mutilated remains. At the time, it had seemed like a friendly gesture (and a good cure for hangovers, as Phil had assured us), but now – waving flies away from my face as I crouch to look into a gaping, perfectly circular hole where the cow's anus should have been – I can feel all that fried organ meat coming back up on me. Maybe Phil gets his sadistic kicks by orchestrating displays of projectile vomiting from his guests. Or maybe he just has it in for journalists.

With a hand covering my mouth, I bolt upright and turn away. James points his Mamiya at me and captures me in mid-gag as Phil drawls, "They took the eyeballs, too... my hunch is they chow 'em down like soft boiled eggs."

I manage not to spew – *barely* – and turn back to face the source of my nausea. The eyeless Guernsey is on its back with its four legs splayed gracelessly. The flesh has been stripped from its lower jaw, exposing teeth and bone. The muddy grass beneath its brown-and-white spotted hide has cratered, as if the cow had been dropped from a great height. There's another perfectly carved, bloodless circle where the udder should have been, providing a unique portal onto the four stomachs of the cow's digestive tract. James points the lens of his camera straight into it and snaps away.

"Ain't no coyote that done this, that's for sure," says Phil.

"How about a wolverine?" suggests James. "Maybe he just crawled right up there and ate that cow's ass out."

"Did the wolverine have a laser scalpel?" I ask him. "Because the edges of those wounds look cauterized. There isn't any blood around them - have you noticed?" There's also an absence of scratched or chewed flesh, as you'd expect to see left behind by the claws and teeth of a predator.

"This is the six or seventh cow I seen killt this way," Phil says, stroking his grizzled chin. He really does look like one of those guys from the Marlboro Man ads: tough and stringy in his jeans and faded flannel shirt, with a weather-beaten face shaded by a hay-flecked Stetson. "Found me the first one back in '84, round about the same time that idjit dope-smoker says he got abducted by aliens."

"So now you're saying aliens did this?" I ask, confused.

"Hell no! Aliens ain't got nothin' to do with it! What, y'all think I'm a goddam fool? What I was about to say was that pothead sumbitch's dog chased one o' my cows off a cliff right before all this got started. *Shoot* - what's the guy's name now?"

"Skeeze," James fills in. "I heard about the bovine cliff-diving incident. But that cow didn't end up looking anything like this one, did it?" He points the lens of his Mamiya into Phil's face and snaps off a few quick frames.

"Naw... like I was sayin', the creepy stuff came later. But I made that boy Skeeze pay me good money on account o' his dog killin' my Guernsey, and I been thinkin' maybe he's been gettin' back at me ever since."

"By coring the anuses out of your dairy cows?"

"You know the guy - this Skeeze fella..." Phil says to James, ignoring me. "You think that hombre's loco enough to do this?" He prods the cow carcass with the toe of his

boot. "Slicin' off udders and rippin' out eyeballs as a sacrifice to Satan, or somethin'?"

"Hard to say..." says James, thoughtfully rubbing his beard.

"That cute little Tipper Gore's been tellin' Congress about how all that dope-smokin' an' heavy metal music makes kids worship the devil. You heard her?"

"Sure - and I believe her. You should've seen me last night after I listened to some Van Halen. I was balls to the wall, dude. If Mephistopheles had shown up and said, 'Hey, I needs me some cow anus!' you can bet I would've got it for him."

Phil gives James a long, hard, Clint Eastwood style stare with the accompanying mouth muscle movements. "You makin' fun o' me, boy?"

"No sir!"

"'Cuz if you are, I'll hog-tie you right here and leave you for the turkey vultures."

"Definitely not making fun of you. No sir," says James, backing up. He points his camera at a horse's ass and takes a picture - a metaphorical self-portrait.

"Well, we best be headin' back, then. Nothin' more to see out here."

"One question before we go, Mister DeSoto," I say, holding up my hand to get his attention. I'm in a crouch again, looking at the grass-flattened indentations from our shoes in the muddy earth. "Did you happen to notice any footprints or animal tracks around the cow when you first showed up here?"

A look of befuddlement crosses Phil's face, if only for an instant. "Y'know, now you mention it, I remember lookin' around, but I di'n't see a dang thing - not even the cow's own hoofprints. It's like that big animal just plain dropped outta the sky last night. Kind of strange, ain't it?"

"Very strange," I agree.



"Black helicopters," I say. "That's what gets my vote."

We're back in Nora's office, seated on the other side of her desk in cheap folding chairs. We've filled her in on what we discovered out at Phil DeSoto's ranch and now we're trying to nail down the Who, What, Where, When, and Whys of a good piece of journalism. So far, we don't have much in the way of hard, reportable facts.

"Maybe it should be an opinion piece," Nora suggests. "Or a human interest story where we get people to talk and then quote them to tell the story."

"I think it was aliens, myself," says James.

"You would," I say.

"No, I would have thought James would be on the side of the Satanists," Nora counters.

"It obviously wasn't Satanists," says James. "I mean, did you see any pentagrams or upside down crucifixes anywhere? Or black candles lying around? Any good Satanist would've at least carved a sigil on the cow's belly - or written 'Helter Skelter' in cow blood somewhere. And, by the way, they don't do take-out. They would've performed their funky black magick rituals right there on the spot,

while the cow was being sacrificed.” He folds his arms across his chest, smugly, as if he’s just proved his point.

“That’s why I think a helicopter was involved,” I say. “The crater under the cow, the absence of tracks... that cow must’ve been dropped there.”

“But why?” Nora asks me.

“Maybe it was a covert government research project. They could be testing for traces of pesticides or radioactivity in the cow’s soft tissues. That would explain the rectum coring and the swiped eyeballs. They’d need tissue samples.”

“But why go to all the trouble of using helicopters when it would be so much easier – and cheaper – to just load a cow into the back of a truck and drive away with it?”

“With helicopters, there’s less chance of being caught.”

“Did Phil happen to say anything about helicopters buzzing around his property?”

“No. He didn’t mention anything.”

“Perhaps you should ask him about that. You would think they’d make quite a racket – especially at night.”

“Not if they’re rotor-silenced XH-75D Stealth anti-gravity Shark helicopters, like the CIA uses,” James says. “But if they are, then they might as well be UFOs, which brings me back around to aliens.”

“Aliens.” Nora places the palms of her hands flat on her desk, looking unimpressed.

“Yeah, little green men. Or those gray suckers with the big, black, almond-shaped eyeballs like Whitley Strieber wrote about in that new book of his: *Communion* – which

you guys should definitely read. It's the only explanation that makes any sense: ALIENS."

"And *why*, may I ask, would the aliens be doing it?"

"Maybe cow anus, to them, is like high-grade sushi. Or maybe they just get off on the cows dying in super-painful ways. Maybe it gives them a big Loosh hit."

"You'll have to explain to me what a 'Loosh hit' might be."

"It's like a bong hit, only with Loosh. Ask Gordon to explain it. He's the expert."

"It was the topic of my lecture at Camozzi's yesterday: 'Galactic Loosh Farming and Reaganomics'..." I remind Nora.

"Oh, *Loosh!* Now I remember. Yes. That subject is a bit esoteric for average newspaper readers, don't you think?"

"We could educate them," I suggest.

"Enlightening as that might be," Nora says diplomatically, "if we start writing about Loosh hits and intergalactic warlocks flying around in black helicopters so they can dine on cow anus sushi, then we might as well change the name on our masthead to *The Batshit Weekly*."

"You're such a salty Editor-in-Chief... I love it!" James enthuses.

"Fortunately, there's another lead we can follow."

"What's that?" I ask Nora.

"Go find this Skeeze character and see if there's any truth to Phil DeSoto's allegations that he's a serial cow mutilator."

"Okay. Sounds good. Do you happen to know where he lives?"

"I'm sure James knows the place. It's Buckthorn Manor."

“Sounds impressive.”

“I think you’ll find it quite the opposite.”

“Think about it...” James says to me. “Skeeze lives there, so how great could it be? Besides, it has another name.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“Most people call it the Rat Castle.”

“Oh. Great.”

“Go...” says Nora, shooing us out the door. “Interview Skeeze. Then report back to me and we’ll see what kind of a story we have. Maybe it’s just a simple case of revenge.”

“*Aliens...*” James whispers, fingering the sutured wound on his forehead in a decidedly spooky way.

“Run along, James. I certainly don’t need you hanging around here with me.”

“I get that from my wife all the time,” says James as he skulks away.

SKEEZE AT THE RAT CASTLE

Buckthorn Manor occupies a dozen hillside acres overlooking the east village of Cambria with a partially obstructed view of the Pacific Ocean through Monterey Pines and scrub oaks. It's a four-story Beaux-Arts mansion that was built around 1912 - then partially rebuilt as a Venetian fantasy palazzo in the late-1920s - by a debonair pretender who went by the name of Lord Buckthorn. The aging, profligate son of a Cleveland railroad parts tycoon, Lord Buckthorn claimed to be an English nobleman, a wildly successful theater impresario, and a serious rival to William Randolph Hearst in matters of commerce, art collecting, and movie starlets' affections. In truth, Lord Buckthorn was none of those things. He was merely a bombastic narcissist with a bushy gray handlebar mustache and bad case of gout.

His never-very-convincing charade was forced to an abject end when the highly leveraged stock portfolio he'd inherited from his father fizzed up into asset-vaporizing margin calls during the Great Crash of 1929. Most of the remodeling work on Buckthorn Manor had been proceeding on credit. That work came to a halt when rumors hit town that Lord Buckthorn had gone bust. Overextended and soon to be bankrupt, he was left no choice but to put the mansion on the market.

Lord Buckthorn's realtors sought their commission fees in vain. There were no purchasers to be found during the

Great Depression for a half-finished Venetian palazzo in rough and woodsy Cambria, despite the ongoing construction of Hearst Castle in San Simeon, just a few miles to the north. Buckthorn Manor's new mansard roof of sea foam green ceramic shingles had been left half-completed, with the remaining area above the roof joists covered only by thin sheets of tar paper. A freak ice storm in January of 1930 sent several large tree branches crashing through that tar paper, leaving the rooms below exposed to rain and the scat-leavings of inquisitive forest creatures. By June, the formerly pastel-hued walls on the mansion's fourth floor had begun to resemble paintings by a despondent Abstract Expressionist: tufts of grey, leafy lichen intersecting with creeping rust stains and damp, musty patches of blackish-green mold.

As Buckthorn Manor fell into its shabby state of disrepair, Lord Buckthorn followed, developing a dependency on cheap whiskey and moneyed spinsters to get him through his remaining years. He died in 1934 after a spectacular display of defenestration: attired in a moth-eaten velvet tuxedo with spark-spitting Chinese fireworks attached to the lapels, he hurled himself from the uppermost window of the Manor while a Rotary Club pancake breakfast fundraiser was taking place in the courtyard below. Observers at the scene speculated that Lord Buckthorn might have survived the fall if he'd landed in the koi pond rather than on the five-foot-long cast iron pancake griddle where his brains were dashed out, and then cooked, like scrambled eggs.

Unbeknownst to Lord Buckthorn at the time of his demise, his penultimate spinster companion, Miss Laura Dodson Huntley, had conceived a child with him several

months earlier at the unlikely age of 45. Their break-up, soon thereafter, had been tempestuous. Lord Buckthorn had callously tossed aside Miss Huntley in his mad pursuit of the seemingly much richer Lady Bracknell, a peripatetic regional theater actress [real name: Patricia Longstreet] who'd been tipped off to Lord Buckthorn's game and was having a bit of fun by leading him on. (If Lord Buckthorn had been as well-versed in works of Oscar Wilde as he'd often professed, he might have seen through the ruse.) Governed by a spiteful pride, the spurned Miss Huntley had concealed her pregnancy from Lord Buckthorn – a decision she came to bitterly regret after his fateful, brain-frying swan dive. To make amends to Lord Buckthorn's departed spirit, Miss Huntley paid off the back taxes on Buckthorn Manor and assumed ownership of it.

Some twenty-five years later, Buckthorn Manor could have served as the setting for a West Coast remake of the Maysles brothers' famous documentary, *Grey Gardens*. Miss Huntley and her daughter, Phoebe, lived in the aborted palazzo amid rotting opulence and raccoon-ravaged heaps of squalor. Their meager trust fund supplied them with only enough income to provide for semi-regular meals after keeping them current with the Manor's onerous property tax burden. Miss Huntley refused to consider sully Lord Buckthorn's legacy by selling his beloved property, but there was never any cash left over for much-needed repairs or improvements. Neither mother nor daughter had been instilled with a do-it-yourself work ethic, so with the passing of time Buckthorn Manor grew increasingly decrepit and decayed.

When Phoebe was twenty-four years old she was seduced while playing bingo one night in the basement of the

Cambria Presbyterian Church. Her seducer, a cad named Renfro Velásquez, was a smooth-talking migrant fruit picker of Scottish, Spanish, and Aztec descent. Their coupling was lubricated by a snoot full of raw gin in the backseat of Renfro's brand-new 1959 Ford Thunderbird. The gin was Phoebe's idea - it was her drink of choice in those days, carried about with her in one of Lord Buckthorn's old monogrammed silver flasks. The loss of her virginity was all Renfro's doing and she found the experience exceedingly unpleasant. It was destined to be her one and only act of coitus. She chose to spend the rest of her life as a haughty alcoholic lesbian.

Two days after Phoebe's harsh deflowering, Renfro Velásquez packed up his sleek and powerful Thunderbird and fled Cambria, never to be seen again. He left Phoebe with a fertilized embryo and a phony forwarding address. She didn't pine for him. In nine months, she duly gave birth to a red-faced, howling baby boy. She named him Steve, after the popular late night television talk show host and genius polymath, Steve Allen. Phoebe's Steve grew up to be something less than a genius polymath, but he was a pretty good surfer, a connoisseur of cannabis, and a locally famous UFO abductee.

He was better known as Skeeze, of course.



The grey slate driveway leading up to Buckthorn Manor is lined with dark, exotic vegetation and cracked Moorish tiles stained algae green with moss. Half-dead creeping vines encircle the sixteen-foot-high fluted Doric columns supporting the mansion's gloomy portico. Everything looks

wild and overgrown, as if it's been untouched by human hands for years.

The mansion's double-height mahogany doors are faded in places where the varnish has peeled away. From behind them, a staticky radio can be heard faintly playing Roberta Flack's sad love song, "Killing Me Softly." And there's something else – the Hollywood nightmare music of a Theremin eerily warbling in accompaniment. Then a great bonging resounds throughout the mansion's interior and the Theremin cuts out.

"Well, at least the doorbell works," I say as James lifts his finger from the button.

Click-clacking footsteps can be heard coming toward us. Then the mahogany doors swing open to reveal Skeeze in all his skuzzy splendor: tawny teeth, scraggly red beard, tousled ginger hair, and dilated green eyes glinting with lechery and Falstaffian merriment. He's wearing a pink, acid green, and orange tie-dyed chenille bathrobe over camouflage cargo shorts and a gaudy Hawaiian shirt featuring a motif of demented toucans and topless brown-skinned hula girls. While not exactly fat (owing to girlish arms and spindly legs), Skeeze has a magnificent paunch. It strains at the buttons of his shiny rayon toucan shirt and somehow lends an extra touch of buxomness to the hula girls by association.

"James..." drawls Skeeze, totally cool.

"Skeeze..." says James, equally nonchalant. "Did we catch you at a bad time?"

"Only good times here, my man. C'mon in." Skeeze turns on the wooden heels of his Japanese sandals and click-clacks back toward the center of the mansion's parlor. "I

was just practicing my Theremin technique. Would you like to hear me play?"

"We'd consider it an honor, wouldn't we, Crash?"

"Oh, you bet..." I say. Eccentricity crackles around Skeeze like a Tesla coil set to maximum weirdness, but I like him already.

The parlor is vast and nearly devoid of furniture. Its coffered wood ceiling is blackened with age and illuminated by a flyspecked chandelier. Dust bunnies gather by the wainscoting. Directly across from us, the mouth of an enormous riverstone fireplace displays an antiquated department store mannequin of a basted boy in a Cub Scout uniform, trussed up and suspended horizontally on a spit, ready for roasting. (*Conceptual art piece or cry for help from a shy serial killer?* I wonder.) A bright orange extension cord snakes across the herringbone floor toward an old Bakelite radio positioned under a Victorian parlor table at the center of the room. The table's marble top supports an odd-looking wooden box with two antennas sticking out of it – one looping out from the side and the other pointing straight up: Skeeze's Theremin.

Roberta Flack is still singing through the static when Skeeze takes his place behind the table and begins caressing the air around the Theremin's antennas with his palms to coax out its unearthly electronic sounds. He expertly reproduces the "Killing Me Softly" melody and – *sotto voce* – starts to sing along (with slightly altered lyrics):

Strumming my clit with his fingers
Singing his wife with his words
Killing me softly with his schlong
Killing me softly... with his schlong

Telling his old wife... with his words
Killing me softly
With his schlong...

James and I applaud vigorously at the song's end. I'm not sure if James intends his clapping to be ironic or appreciative, but I'm in the latter category. Was the humor lewd and juvenile? Sure - but there was something strangely compelling about the performance, nonetheless.

Skeeze steps away from the Theremin and takes a slight bow. As he squats to unplug everything, a disheveled Old English Sheepdog pads over to him and licks his cheek. "Coyote's always glad when I turn this sucker off," Skeeze says. "I think it hurts his ears. But then sometimes he howls along like he thinks we're in a band, so I don't know... maybe it's fun for him."

"You should take that act to Camozzi's," James suggests. "Crash and I did a lecture there last night. We kicked ass."

"Is that where the stitches came from?" Skeeze asks, nodding at James' forehead. It's only then that I notice Skeeze has a small red-orange dot - a *tilak* - painted in the center of his own forehead, right where his third eye is supposed to be. He turns to me and bows with his palms pressed together, fingers pointing upward, and says: "Hey, Crash. Skeeze Lester Huntley. *Namaste*."

I've heard that one before. The Hindu salutation, *Namaste*, is often used as a greeting at Esalen, but it always struck me as pretentious when it came from the mouth of some solemn hippie goon aiming for guruhood, or from one of those achingly sincere Earth Mother types hoping to start a new career as a yoga instructor or a massage

therapist. Somehow, coming from an uninhibited freak like Skeeze, it sounds more genuine.

"Namaste to you, too, Skeeze." I say with a bow toward his Japanese sandals. "Nice place you've got here."

"Yeah? It's just a little somethin' my grandpa put together, right before he lost all his money in the Great Depression and threw himself out a window. C'mon, I'll give you a tour."

There are many rooms in Buckthorn Manor – and many rats. Most of them are white or piebald, the sort of refined rats you might expect to find jogging on an exercise wheel in a pet store. However, I catch a few glimpses of big, coarse-furred sewer rats scampering around as well. Skeeze doesn't seem to notice them, but when we enter his dilapidated kitchen and we're treated to the sight of a raccoon taking a stringy black shit on the yellow-tiled countertop, he grabs a seat cushion from a nearby chair and hurls it at the bandit-faced defecator, shouting imprecations:

"Goddamit, Señor Pepe! How many times do I have to tell you? No shitting where we eat!"

The raccoon hops down off the counter and waddles away, sniffing in irritation while glancing back at us over his hairy gray shoulder, as if his dignity has been slighted.

"Go on! Keep acting all snooty like that, Pepe, and I'll make *you* clean it up!" Skeeze throws a dishrag at the raccoon's bushy ringed tail to spur him on his way.

"That Señor Pepe's a real fucktard, huh?" says James.

"You give a raccoon a home, you feed him tacos and burritos, and this is how he repays you," Skeeze grumbles. He takes a rusty spatula to the gross coil of raccoon crap and shovels it into a garbage pail beneath the sink.

"What's with all the rats, Skeeze?" I ask. "Are they pets, too?"

"Sort-of, yeah. More like roommates, actually. Have you ever been to Karni Mata?"

"Uhm, no. What's Karni Mata?"

"It's a 600-year-old temple in India, up near the Pakistan border, where rats are considered holy."

"Oh fuck..." says James, "does that mean all the Indian cats are going to hell?"

"I didn't see any cats there when I visited a few years ago, but the temple has about twenty thousand rats, all living the good life: drinking buffalo milk every day, eating candy, and just hanging out. It's awesome. You should see it."

"It sounds like that freaky old horror movie, *Willard*," I say. "Y'know, the one with the weird kid and his army of killer rats?"

"I love that movie!" Skeeze exclaims.

"Me, too," says James. "Every movie should have a scene where Ernest Borgnine gets eaten alive by rats."

"But guys, these temple rats are *friendly*," says Skeeze. "They've never attacked anybody, or made anyone sick, ever. When you visit Karni Mata you have to go in barefoot, and if a rat runs across your feet it's considered good luck. If you see a white rat, that's even better. But if you freak out and kill a rat, for whatever reason, then you have to replace it with a solid gold rat statue, which can get kind of expensive. So everybody just *loves* the rats there. They're supposed to be the reincarnated tribespeople of Shri Karni Mata, who was some fourteenth-century warrior babe who's now known as the rat goddess. She'll protect you if

you take care of her rats for her. Which is why I've got my own little rat menagerie going on here."

"So these are Karni Mata's rats?" I ask.

"Yeah. I wasn't supposed to, but I accidentally snuck some baby rats out of the temple in my backpack. They got in there to nibble on some bread and cheese I had with me and I didn't even know it when I walked away with them. By the time I found out, I was already back in Jaipur. I felt really bad, but they were such cute little fuckers! I decided I couldn't let them go inside the hotel. Anyway, they were too little to survive on their own. So I smuggled 'em on the plane in my underpants and they've been breeding here ever since."

"Wasn't Karni Mata pissed?"

"No way! I think she likes me. Now she has another temple: Karni Mata West."

"Otherwise known as the Rat Castle," James says in his droll radio announcer's voice.

"C'mon upstairs... I'll show you their bedroom. There's, like, two or three hundred rats in there, at least."

"I think I'll pass," says James.

"How 'bout you, Crash?"

"Sure. Let's go."

"There's beer in the fridge, James. Help yourself," Skeeze says as he click-clacks up the creaky wooden staircase. "Oh - and if Señor Pepe comes back, keep him away from the refried beans. I think he's had enough."



I decide to conduct my interview with Skeeze in the rats' bedroom, away from James and his belittling sarcasm. It just seems easier that way. There's a downside to that decision, however: I'll have to deal with the cloying funk of a few hundred rats living together in close quarters. The bedroom is overrun with them. There are rats napping in the folds of the scarlet duvet cover on top of the antique four-poster bed; rats climbing on the reproduction Louis XIV chairs; rats frolicking on the Persian carpets; rats nesting in the shredded cashmere sweaters that bloom, like pastel sea anemones, from open dresser drawers. Everything has been gnawed upon, befouled and beshitted – but there's also an underlying vibe of contented industriousness. It wouldn't be much of a stretch to say that the rats must be happy.

After I tell Skeeze I'm a reporter and I explain my reasons for wanting to interview him, he stretches out on the rat-lumpy bed with his back against the red velvet headboard and he says it's cool – I can ask him anything. Coyote the Sheepdog enters the room at that point and jumps up on the bed with Skeeze, scattering rats everywhere. The two of them make a fine pair: shaggy and attentive, seemingly eager to please.

Before we can begin, a large white rat climbs up the side of the bed and brushes its quivering whiskers against Skeeze's hand. "Hey there, Samsara," Skeeze says, picking the rat up and placing it on top of his head. The rat peers out at me from the tangle of ginger hair as if it's scanning the horizon from the crow's nest of a whaling ship. There's a smudge of black around the rat's left eye, reminiscent of Cleopatra's eyeliner. "Samsara's my Queen Rat," Skeeze tells me. "She's the only one left out of the original Karni

Mata Four. She's in rat menopause now, but she used to get knocked up all the time. I'll bet she's the great-grandma of most of the rats here."

"Way to go, Samsara... you little slut."

Samsara twitches her pink nose at me and frantically grinds her hindquarters into Skeeze's hair as if she's trying for one final, desperate, geriatric rat orgasm.

It's hard to conduct a serious interview when the interviewee has a masturbating rat on his head, but I do my best:

"So Skeeze..." I say, flipping open my reporter's notebook, "I was told there's some animosity between you and Phil DeSoto. I've already heard his side of the story; now I'd like to hear yours."

Skeeze rolls his eyes as if he's trying to get a better look at Samsara before she climaxes or deals him something worse than dandruff. "This is about Coyote tangling with Phil's cows, isn't it?"

If it's possible for a dog to take umbrage, Coyote is exhibiting those facial characteristics now - although sometimes, I'll admit, I tend to take anthropomorphism a bit too far.

"Phil happened to mention that Coyote chased one of his Guernseys off a cliff. But that's not the whole story, is it?"

"Did Phil happen to mention that I lost a whole summer of my glorious surf-riding youth working as a clerk in the Shell station so I could pay that cow off? Or did he happen to mention that he charged me three times what that stupid blind cow was actually worth?"

"Um, he *did* say something about making you pay for it, but he neglected to tell me about the ripping-you-off part."

"Figures."

"Are you holding a grudge?"

"That wouldn't be very evolved of me, would it?" Skeeze taps the *tilak* at the center of his forehead like it's an Eject button for his brainpan.

"I'm just asking...."

"Let's cut to the chase: I know Phil blames me for the cattle mutilations out on his ranch. Has there been another one?"

"Just this morning. I was out there looking at it with Phil and James. It wasn't a pretty."

Skeeze harrumphs. "I wouldn't think so. Did they core out the anus again? Take the eyeballs?"

"How'd you guess?"

"I didn't do it, if that's what you're thinking. But I'm pretty sure I know who did."

"Who?"

"The dudes in the black triangle. Aliens."

"These, um, aliens... it sounds like you know them personally."

"It's no secret that I got abducted around four years ago. Coyote was there with me. *He* could tell you."

"If he wasn't a dog."

"Right - if he was human. But it's kind of his fault, actually. The whole thing got started when Coyote decided to eat out a cow's pussy."

"Am I correct in assuming we're not talking about cattle mutilation in this case?"

“Right. Just your normal dog-on-cow oral sex arrangement.”

“I’m not sure how normal that really is, Skeeze.” No more normal, certainly, than the elderly rat shuddering to *la petite mort* at that very instant on top of Skeeze’s head.

“Well, it happened, anyway. The Kundalini energy around me is really strong. I think other animals pick up on it – and it makes them horny.”

That’s another term I used to hear tossed around at Esalen all the time: *Kundalini* – the so-called “serpent energy” that resides at the base of your spine. When awakened through chanting and meditation, it’s supposed to rise up through your *chakras* and shoot straight out the top of your skull, resulting in oneness with the godhead and access to long-dormant occult powers hidden in our collective DNA, like telepathy and the ability to have eight-hour-long Tantric orgasms. At least that’s the theory, anyway....

I watch as a rivulet of clear fluid trickles down the side of Skeeze’s ear. He swipes at it, muttering, “God, Samsara, did you just pee on me?”

“I think she was getting off on your Kundalini energy there, bro.”

“So she’s a squirter! No wonder the boy-rats liked her so much! But see what I mean? My Kundalini is so strong it can make even a spent old she-rat like Samsara feel kinky. And look what it’s done to Coyote, who’s been around me the longest. He’s turned into a hardcore bovine pussy hound.”

“Why not just hump other dogs?”

“I guess he likes the challenge.”

“Did he really perform cunnilingus on a cow’s vagina?” Coyote’s long pink tongue is lolling as he pants in the warm, stuffy room, making it rather easy for me to imagine him doing the deed.

“You bet he did!” Skeeze enthuses, taking a sort of fatherly pride in his shaggy best friend. “Coyote went down on that cow like a champ! But as soon as he did, I started getting really creeped out, like someone was watching us. Then this freaky alien-insect-machine humming started up – and the aliens showed up in their huge black triangle UFO. They caught Coyote and the cow in their tractor beam, or whatever, and sucked them right up through a hole in the triangle’s belly. They got my friend, Josh, too. And then they came after me.”

“This happened on Phil DeSoto’s ranch, out where the cow went over the cliff?”

“No, this was later, on Hearst property. We were trespassing. It seems incredibly dumb now, but me and Josh went out there to do a little midnight cow tipping.”

“I’m taking a wild guess: you were drunk?”

“And seriously stoned.”

“And you’re sure you weren’t just hallucinating?”

“I get asked that all the time, but believe me, I’d know the difference.”

“Could you have been hypnotized?”

“No way.”

“Dreaming?”

“Not a fucking chance.”

“Okay... let’s say I believe you. Can you tell me what happened onboard the UFO?”

"I'd be glad to... but d'you mind if I get high first? It helps bring back the memories."

"Hey, it's your house. Do what you want. I won't report it in the newspaper, if that's what you're worried about."

"Do you partake of the devil's weed yourself, Crash?"

"Not often. And after last night, I really shouldn't... but I guess a few tokes won't hurt me."

"Let's go down to the basement then. I've got something I want to show you." Skeeze gives me a meaningful glance. "I can trust you, right?"

"Sure. I'm a very trustworthy kind of guy."

"I thought so. I could tell by your aura. But you can't tell James about this, okay?"

"No problem." What else can I say? My curiosity is aroused. I'm also quite sure that James has been told many secrets (mainly from his Uncle Lloyd) that he's sworn to keep from me.



The only way in or out of Skeeze's basement is through a large dumbwaiter shaft hidden behind a Batmanesque trick bookcase against the back wall of the rats' bedroom (push on a dummy copy of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and the whole thing swings open on hidden hinges, etcetera). Skeeze shows me the ropes: two of them dangling from pulleys in the center of the shaft. Grabbing them, he positions himself, barefoot, on a wobbly two-foot-square of solid oak and then, hand-over-hand, he lowers himself by pulling on the ropes, which have been counterweighted to match his body mass. It'll be more of an

effort for me, Skeeze explains, since I don't weigh as much as he does.

I watch him descend into the shaft's dark pit with Samsara still clinging to the tufts of his wildly askew hair. Then, three floors below, they disappear in a burst of dazzling light as Skeeze goes through what must be a door at the bottom of the shaft that opens onto a well-lit room. "C'mon down!" he yells like a Bob Barker *manqué* as the square of oak goes clattering back up the shaft toward me.

Leaning forward, I recognize the funky-sweet smell of fresh cannabis coming up the shaft like smoke from a chimney. I realize then that I've been smelling it all along in the rat's bedroom, where it's masked by the ammonia stench of rat piss and the more cloying scent of sweaty rat fur. As I begin my descent, I get an inkling of what Skeeze might be up to down there.

Sure enough, the doorway at the bottom of the dumbwaiter shaft opens onto an enormous underground hydroponic marijuana growing operation – but before I can take in its true scope, my eyes need a few moments to adjust. Skeeze has banks of almost painfully bright growlights in there that look like they could do double-duty at a football stadium during night games. His electricity bill must be staggering.

Blinking, I soon realize that some of the profusely budding plants in there must be over twelve feet tall – and there's almost no end to them. The basement walls seem to extend far beyond the already large footprint of Buckthorn Manor. Skeeze confirms that observation when he says, "My grandpa built a wine cellar down here that stretched way back under the hill. I don't know what he was thinking – he never could've bought enough wine to fill it. My grandma

said he must've been digging for gold after the stock market crash wiped him out. But I'm pretty sure the only gold that's ever come out of here is Acapulco Gold – and it's worth its weight in the real stuff, if you know what I mean."

"Skeeze Lester Huntley, you have unsuspected business acumen."

"You don't know the half of it, dude. I've been growing some of the finest weed in California down here. Check this out: I went to the old house in L.A. where W.C. Fields used to live and I used the dirt from his backyard to germinate the seeds for this batch." Skeeze strokes the leaves of some tall, sturdy indica plants blooming with purple, red-haired buds. "I call it The Great McGonigle. It'll make you laugh your ass off. And this one over here" – pointing to a towering dark green monster – "is Thelonius Skunk. It's a great high for when you're listening to jazz."

"How much is all this worth?" I blurt out. Definitely not the most tactful thing to say to a dope grower I'm just getting to know, but I can't help myself.

"For the past couple of years, I've been plowing most of my profits back into the business," Skeeze answers, unfazed. "You're looking at over a hundred grand in grow lights, seeds, and hydroponics here. But this year I plan to cash out, maybe buy a boat and sail it down to Costa Rica. I've got around fifteen hundred plants flowering right now – all females. Each plant is good for around half a pound of primo bud, which I can offload to my network of dealers at \$100 an ounce, wholesale. The leaves and shake will be worth something, too. The way I figure it, when harvest time comes around and I dry and cure this shit, it'll be worth over a million bucks, easy."

“Wow,” I say, kind of dumbstruck. “How the hell did you go from working at the Shell station to... all this?”

“I think the aliens did something to my brain when they abducted me,” Skeeze says with a straight face. “After they set me down again, I was a lot more interested in figuring things out – y’know... like, the meaning of life and stuff. I wanted to go off to India to meet gurus and groove on holy rat temples. So I knew I had to make some serious cash without getting tied down to a regular job. Then one day I had a brainstorm: ‘*Skeeze*,’ I said to myself, ‘*you should grow dope!*’”

“I think a lot of people have had that particular brainstorm,” I say, “but hardly anyone ends up taking it to this level.”

“What can I say?” Skeeze shrugs. “The aliens made me really believe in myself. I came out of that UFO feeling like I had the power to manifest anything I needed in my life. It was like Deepak Chopra married Shirley MacLaine and they both shot up with crushed hamster gonads and pure Sandoz LSD and made a bunch of bald-headed little grey test tube babies with telepathic powers who grew up to be totally awesome self-help gurus.”

“Self-help gurus who fly around in a triangular spaceship coring the rectums out of cows.”

“Uhm, *yeah...*” – Skeeze clears his throat – “that’s some rad shit, when you see it happening right in front of you.”

“You actually saw them do it?”

“Uh-huh. That’s another thing they changed about me. Now I’m strictly vegetarian.”

“What really happened up there? Can you tell me?”

“Yeah, but like I said, let’s light up first. I was stoned when I got abducted, so stoned is the best way for me to talk about it.”

Skeeze goes over to a candy apple red Snap-on tool storage locker and unlocks the door to reveal dozens of Saran-wrapped stacks of hundred dollar bills, several more similarly wrapped bricks of hashish, and an elaborate, multi-colored blown glass bong that looks like it might have been sculpted by the master glassmakers in Murano – or maybe by some renegade artist from Dale Chihuly’s Pilchuck Glass School, up near Seattle.

“Jesus, Skeeze, aren’t you worried about getting ripped off?” Again, tactless... but Skeeze doesn’t seem to care.

“I’ve got Karni Mata looking after my ass, remember?” he says, packing the bong’s bowl with a gritty chunk of hash. “Besides, most people think I’m just crazy Skeeze from the Rat Castle – the brain-dead surfer who got picked up by a UFO. My weirdness is my cover. No one would ever suspect me of being the Dope King of Central California. I’m totally discreet – except with you today, but my inner voice told me you were part of my *karass*, so it’s cool.”

Skeeze fires up the bong with a gold Dunhill lighter. The glass chamber fills up with thick white tendrils of smoke, like ink from an albino squid. Skeeze carbs it, clearing the chamber of smoke with a mighty inhalation, and then passes the bong to me.

“I’ve heard that word *karass* before,” I say, “but I can’t remember where.” I’ve never smoked hash. I worry that it’ll fuck me up even worse than Kayleigh’s pot brownies did, so I only take a smallish hit and try to hold most of the smoke in my mouth, rather than inhale it.

“Kurt Vonnegut came up with that word,” says Skeeze. “He wrote about it in *Cat’s Cradle*. A *karass* is a group of people who share a spiritual destiny – sort of a secret team that does God’s Work without ever knowing how they’re doing it, or why they got tangled up together in the first place.”

I pass the bong back to Skeeze and he hits it again. “So you recognize members of your *karass*... like... how?” I ask him.

Blowing out smoke with a dooper’s croak, Skeeze answers: “It’s just a vibe I get, something I can squint at with my third eye and barely make out.”

Skeeze’s third eye is looking particularly red to me at that moment, but I think I know the vibe he’s referring to: “Sometimes, when I meet certain people for the first time, I get a weird feeling of *déjà vu*, like we’ve known each other in some other world. I had that feeling with Terence McKenna the first time I saw him give a lecture at Esalen. And today, I’ve been having it with you.”

“That’s it! That’s how you know you’ve met another member of your *karass* – they’re like spirit friends you hung out with in past lives before you got reincarnated into this one.”

“Holy crap!” I say, suddenly dizzy and dislocated by the invisible numbing descent of an unexpected headrush.

“Gets right on top of you, doesn’t it?”

“I just held the smoke in my mouth! I didn’t even inhale!”

“I noticed that... but this Frosty Banana Bubba Kush hybrid is a stealthy motherfucker. It gets right in through the pores on your tongue.”

“Damn. Now I’ll have to blow off the whole afternoon.”

“So the interview’s over?”

“When I get this high, it tends to impair my short-term memory. And I probably won’t be able to take notes for shit.”

“Then maybe we should just kick back and watch a documentary. Have you ever seen *A Strange Harvest* by Linda Moulton Howe?”

“Never heard of it. What’s it about?”

“Cattle mutilations. You should check it out. C’mon, let’s go find James and I’ll set it up.”



By the end of *A Strange Harvest*, I find I’ve gained a lot of stoned respect for Linda Moulton Howe. She came off as highly educated but kind of sexy – like a foxier version of my high school physics teacher – but what really impressed me was her ability to venture into the realm of high weirdness without appearing flaky. Never losing her professorial aplomb, Howe presented her grisly evidence of cattle mutilations (newspaper stories, on-the-scene photographs, etc.) while she conducted interviews with ranchers, law enforcement officials, forensic experts, and a surgeon who worked with cutting-edge medical laser technology. Her documentary’s inescapable conclusion was that something very strange – and most likely alien-related – was happening to the hundreds of cows that had been found mutilated over the past decade.

There was a distinct pattern to the mutilations. The cows, for the most part, were missing their rectums, sex organs, eyes, and tongues. Sometimes they were completely

drained of blood. The incisions were always bloodless and eerily smooth – and when examined under a microscope, showed evidence of having been heated to an extremely high temperature, as if carved by lasers. One rancher in Wyoming speculated that “a sex cult from the university” was responsible for the bovine mayhem, but that was a minority opinion. By the time the end credits rolled, a gray-bearded UFO researcher named Richard Sigismund was suggesting that the mutilated cattle were being left in plain sight by design, as a slow reveal, so we wouldn’t experience culture shock when we discovered aliens living among us.

But here’s what I wanted to know: If the aliens thought the best way to announce their presence was by stealing our cows’ eyeballs and anuses, then what did that say about them, exactly? (Of course, we – as a species – don’t treat our cows any better, slaughtering them daily so we can turn them into Big Macs, bomber jackets, and car upholstery, among other things....) Could an alien race of serial cow mutilators really be expected to have a benevolent attitude toward mankind?

After Skeeze turns off his gargantuan television and starts rewinding the videotape, our conversation naturally gravitates toward his own UFO abduction experience:

James says, “I guess you must be glad the aliens didn’t aim a laser up your hairy brown bunghole, too, eh Skeeze?”

“Yeah, I never thought I’d be saying this, but it’s good to have a fully intact bunghole.” Skeeze reaches under his tie-dyed chenille bathrobe and scratches near the region under discussion.

“You said you saw them mutilate a cow right in front of you when you were abducted,” I remind him. “Do you have any idea *why* they did that?”

Skeeze nods his head. "A few months ago, I heard Linda Moulton Howe give a talk on late-night AM radio where she said she'd met a top-level military officer – some guy with Above-Top-Secret security clearances – who'd given her the best explanation yet for the mutilations. He told her to think of it as a genetic harvest. But from what I've seen, the guy had it backwards. The aliens aren't harvesting cow DNA; they're hacking up cows so we don't get our hands on their *alien* DNA."

"How's that work?" I want to know.

"It'll make more sense if I just tell you what I saw," says Skeeze.

"Was this before or after you gargled alien semen?" James taunts him. "Because it seems like you could get a pretty good DNA sample that way, if you didn't swallow."

"Dude, I was just fucking with you that night in Camozzi's," Skeeze laughs. "I wanted to see if you were homophobic."

"Did I pass?" James asks, unchagrined.

"Well, you didn't run away," Skeeze grants, "but on the other hand, you didn't offer to blow me."

"Like I ever would," James scoffs. "You're not pretty enough."

"Ignore him," I say to Skeeze. "Just tell us the story."

"James has already heard most of it."

"Well, tell it again," says James, "while I go take a piss." He sets down his bottle of beer and shuffles off in search of one of Buckthorn Manor's many bathrooms.

"So..." Skeeze begins, turning to me while resting an arm on the back on his green buttoned leather sofa, "like I said,

late one night at the Hearst Ranch me and Coyote and my buddy, Josh, got kidnapped by one of those black triangle UFOs. Oh, and Coyote's cow fuck buddy, too. It made me wonder if the Hearsts had aliens working their security detail. Anyway, we all ended up in this round domed room with walls that were totally smooth. No windows, no doors – nothing. The walls kind of glowed, so we could see everything just fine, but at the same time it was kind of dark in there and... I know this might sound weird... but I felt this sleazy, sexy vibe all around us, like we were hanging out in a porno theater, or an S&M dungeon lit by black lights or something. But maybe that was just me."

"Did Josh feel it, too?"

"I don't know. I didn't get a chance to ask him, because right then this tough old dude in a military uniform showed up. He, like, walked right through the wall, actually. One second we were alone and the cow was having this major panic attack, lifting its tail and spraying like twenty gallons of horrendous green diarrhea all over the spaceship's floor, and the next thing I knew this guy with a silver buzz cut was just *there*, saying, 'Good evening, gents.'"

"He actually used the word 'gents'?"

"He actually did. 'Gents,' he said, 'I'm your tour guide, General Nathan Vandersen, and you've just won yourselves a round-trip ticket to the far side of the Moon. Now if you'll kindly join me for a dip in our anti-gravity pool, we'll be on our way.'"

"I'm thinking to myself, *What the fuck is an anti-gravity pool?* when the floor starts moving, spiraling open to this black pool of... *gel* or something. Black gel that's crackling with static from a dead channel on a TV set, maybe... I can't really describe it any better than that. The General said we

could breathe it, eat it, even *shit* in it like ol' Bessie there, and we'd be okay. But we couldn't leave it while the ship was in flight, or the g-forces would tear us apart."

"That's always been one of the arguments against UFOs existing in a material, nuts-and-bolts kind of way," I point out. "The g-forces created by the sudden accelerations and 90-degree turns that they make would supposedly kill any flesh-and-blood pilot."

"Yeah, well, let me tell you, I've never been so scared of anything in all my life. There was *no fucking way* I was about to get in that damn anti-gravity pool. I was sure I'd sink right through it and fall out the bottom of the spaceship. Even after General Vandersen jumped in there and started doing the backstroke to show us how safe it was, I *still* wanted to take my chances with the g-forces. But then the floor slid out from under my feet and I fell in, face-first. Josh, Coyote, and the cow went right in with me."

"What did it feel like?"

"You know what it feels like when your leg falls asleep? It was like that, only squishier. I got some of the anti-gravity gel in my mouth before I came up for air and it was like licking a penny and snorting Vicks VapoRub at the same time – but in a good way. I could tell that General Vandersen wasn't lying: I could breathe in it, if I needed to. It wasn't like water at all – except you could swim in it, of course, because... *duh...* there was no gravity when you were in it."

"So what stopped you from floating up to the ceiling?"

"I guess the anti-gravity effect ended right where the anti-gravity pool did. When the ship started accelerating, I felt the g-forces push me right under, until I was completely covered. Then, when it slowed down as we approached the

Moon, like two minutes later, I bobbed up to the surface again. It was kind of cool.”

“So you went to the Moon in just two minutes?”

“That’s what General Vandersen told us – although I might’ve blacked out, so I guess it could’ve taken longer. I didn’t have a watch on me to check the time. But anyway, when I asked the General how he’d scored such a fast spaceship, he told me it was ‘hand-me-down’ technology – whatever *that* means....”

“I’m guessing it means aliens gave it to him, but only because they have something that goes even faster,” I speculated. “Or maybe it was reverse-engineered from the UFO crash at Roswell in 1947. I met an old guy at Esalen a couple of years ago who said he’d worked most of his life as an engineer out at Lockheed’s Skunk Works, and he claimed Roswell had been the key to a lot of their early projects. He told me he’d been sworn to secrecy about what went on out there, but he was dying of cancer and he just didn’t give a shit anymore. All he wanted to do was sit in the hot tubs all day and get massaged by naked Esalen chicks.”

“Sounds like he finally got his priorities straight,” says Skeeze.

“That’s what *I* thought,” I concur. “So, anyway, this guy – I think his name was Bill Rich, or *Ben* Rich, something like that... anyway, he told me there were two types of UFOs: ‘the ones we build and the ones *they* build’ – *they* being aliens. He used to think the public couldn’t handle the truth about aliens and UFOs, but with death staring him in the face he started to think that the biggest threat to humanity wasn’t from the aliens themselves, but from what he called ‘the international corporate board of directors’ that was

keeping the alien technology for their own private uses. One thing he said really stuck with me:

“‘We already have the means to travel among the stars,’ he said, ‘but these technologies are locked up in black projects, and it would take an act of God to ever get them out to benefit humanity.’

“He also said: ‘Anything you can imagine, we already know how to do.’ Including time travel – at least according to him. Of course, this old guy could’ve been just a tripped-out Alzheimer’s patient, or a pathological liar, but at the time he struck me as incredibly knowledgeable and sincere. So, y’know, call me credulous, but I guess I don’t find it entirely outside the realm of possibility that the U.S. military might have a black triangle UFO that can make it to the Moon in two minutes flat.”

“Me either, now that I’ve bought the ticket and taken the ride.” Skeeze lights up a thin joint to reboot his high. He offers it to me, but I pass on it with a wave of my hand, pointing to the reporter’s notebook flipped open in my lap. I’ve been taking notes.

“One thing that kind of freaked me out...” Skeeze continues, “well, actually, a lot of things freaked me out on this trip, but this one thing in particular was, as we were getting ready to land on the Moon, the walls and ceiling above the anti-gravity pool just dissolved away and it was like we were looking out into deep space. For a while there, I thought all the air had been sucked out of my lungs. But then I realized it was the anti-gravity pool *projecting a picture* of deep space onto the walls above the pool. I realized then that the gel could display images on its skin like a movie screen and... this really blew my mind...” Skeeze pauses as he fishes an alligator clip out of the

pocket of his robe and attaches it to the remainder of the joint. "I suddenly knew that the whole spaceship was covered with anti-gravity gel, or whatever it was – some new form of 5th-dimensional energy, maybe – and by projecting a perfect image of the sky moving above it onto the gel across its belly, the black triangle would be *invisible* to people looking up at it from the ground."

"So there might be black triangles flying above us all the time and we'd never know it."

"Exactly!" says Skeeze, sucking hard on the roach. "Cool, huh?"

"Depends on if they're friendly or not," I say.

"Oh. Yeah! Well, if we're talking about aliens, some of the ones I met were friendly, and some of 'em weren't, y'know? Just like with people. I mean, Hitler and Eleanor Roosevelt were born, like, what... five years apart? Know what I'm sayin'?"

At that moment, James returns from the bathroom. "Did Skeeze tell you about the dogs in Superman costumes yet?" he asks with a smirk.

"I was just getting to that..." Skeeze says, offering James the last of the roach. James takes it and inhales sharply, burning it down to nothing but a twisted char of paper.

Exhaling, James croaks, "Who sees Golden Retrievers in blue tights and external red underpants while they're getting abducted by a UFO? Only a dope-addled surfer with the mind of a mongoloid child... in other words, only Skeeze – that's who."

"Eat my dick, James," Skeeze grumbles.

"I already told you: you're too ugly. But if you're nice to me, I might set you up on a date with a cow, like our

government does for your alien buddies.”

“Yeah, that’s what I found out,” Skeeze says to me: “the U.S. military’s been pimping cows to the aliens. That’s what the cattle mutilations are all about.”

“Did I just miss something?” I ask.

“Well, James was kind of getting ahead of the story. Let’s back it up,” says Skeeze. “So we’re coming in for a landing on the dark side of the Moon, right? And on the walls and ceiling inside the spaceship, the anti-gravity gel is projecting a 360-degree view of what the ship is seeing from the outside, so it gives us the illusion that we’re landing in a convertible. It was totally cool. But as we got closer to the Moon’s surface, I started seeing these lights on high towers above some of the craters – like stadium lights, only brighter.”

“Does any of this sound familiar?” James asks me.

I flash on the conversation we had with his uncle five years earlier, when Lloyd told us that aliens were doing construction work under gigantic football stadium lights on the far side of the Moon. The method by which he’d acquired that information had been somewhat convoluted:

Lloyd sold rocket insurance as a cover for being a black ops bagman. He claimed his insurance company had been contacted in 1975 by a consortium of investors who were interested in assuming private ownership of NASA’s shuttered Saturn V rocket program. The investors thought they might use Saturn V rockets to mine the isotope Helium-3 from the Moon’s surface, where it was deposited in great abundance by the solar winds. Although extremely rare on Earth, Helium-3 was known to be an ideal fusion fuel source: amazingly potent, non-polluting, and virtually

free of radioactive by-products. A single Saturn V payload of Helium-3 could theoretically supply all of the Earth's energy needs for an entire year – and in doing so, provide a stunning return on equity – but, of course, many things could go wrong along the way. To minimize their risks, the investors wanted Lloyd to insure their rockets, if they ended up buying them. But before he could do that, Lloyd needed to find out why NASA had decided to halt all manned Moon missions in 1972, despite having already built three launch-ready Saturn V rockets at enormous taxpayer expense.

To that end, Lloyd had covertly hired the services of Ingo Swann – the first, and arguably the best, test psychic from the Stanford Research Institute's remote viewing program. Using Senator Charlie Rose as a liaison, Lloyd had arranged to have Swann picked up in front of a museum and escorted, blindfolded, to an underground bunker where (posing as a Mr. Axelrod) Lloyd paid him to remote-view a list of lunar map coordinates that corresponded to potential Helium-3 mining sites.

One of the sites on Ingo Swann's remote viewing to-do list was a crater on the far side of the Moon that had been named after John Whiteside Parsons – a Pasadena rocket scientist who was one of the original founders of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, more commonly known as JPL. In 1942, Parsons had made a crucial breakthrough in solid rocket fuel that allowed the Americans to catch up to the Nazi rocketry program at Peenemünde. During that same year, the Great Beast himself, Aleister Crowley, had personally appointed Parsons as the American leader of Crowley's magickal order, the Ordo Templi Orientis (or OTO). So Parsons happened to be an expert in both phallic

sex-magick rituals and rocket launches, which aren't all that different when you think about it.

(Four or five years later, as part of his work for the OTO, Parsons met up with a con artist named L. Ron Hubbard – the future messiah of Scientology. They stroked their magick wands together for a sex-magick ritual called *The Babalon Working*, which was supposed to result in the incarnation of the Antichrist. Some of Parsons' peers have suggested that *The Babalon Working* opened up an interdimensional energy portal that made our world susceptible to invasion by aliens in their flying saucers, beginning in the summer of 1947 with the sightings over Mount Rainier and the crash at Roswell – but that's a whole different story....)

I say to James: "I remember your uncle telling us that when Ingo Swann remote-viewed Parsons Crater, he didn't just see moon rocks and craters, like he'd expected. Instead, he saw towers and bridges and stadium lights everywhere. He also saw tractor-like things zipping up and down hills, and flying saucers stored under domes beside long, smooth roads that looked like airport runways."

"Oh man! That's exactly what I saw!" Skeeze exclaims. "Along with some huge-ass pyramids and those spiky things like the Washington Monument."

"Obelisks," I inform him.

"Right – obelisks! And the weirdest thing was, I saw a bunch of naked guys out there working away like slaves, digging in craters with pickaxes and driving around in skip loaders and dump trucks."

Ingo Swann had seen the naked men, too, but he hadn't been able to tell if they were human.

“Nude dudes on the Moon!” James says, reviving our sarcastic catchphrase from five years earlier, when Lloyd first told us the story. “You guys are both nuts.”

“Dude, I saw it with my own eyes,” Skeeze says.

“Then your eyes lied to you,” James rebuts. “I think you stayed right on Earth and went on a psyops Disney ride. Everyone knows the Moon doesn’t have any fucking atmosphere to breathe, and even if it did, on the dark side it’s like four hundred degrees below zero, anyway, so those nude dudes would be freezing their balls off.”

“I saw what I saw...” Skeeze maintains.

“You saw Golden Retrievers in Superman costumes flying a spaceship, you nimrod. Just how credible a witness do you really think you are?”

“Yeah, the fucking dogs...” Skeeze says in a hushed, awed tone. “Man, that was weird.”

“Tell me about the dogs,” I encourage him.

“Okay. So after we landed at the Moon base, General Vandersen asked us if we wanted to meet our pilots. And I said, ‘Sure!’ thinking they’d be just ordinary Air Force pilots or something. So a door opened up where there wasn’t any door before and we went down this long hallway until we came to a room that was full of anti-gravity gel, like, from floor-to-ceiling. And the General said, ‘Don’t worry, we’ll still be able to talk.’ Then he pushed me and Josh through it and came in after us. I was kind of freaking out again, because it was hard to move around in there – no gravity, right? – and there wasn’t any air above my head, like there was the last time. But then I started to breathe inside the gel again and I told myself it was cool. I was just starting to calm down when I looked across the room and saw these two Golden

Retrievers sitting upright, strapped into chairs. I start freaking out again, because they had on these blue pajamas with baggy red underpants on the outside and they were sitting in front of a bunch of control panels like you'd see inside the cockpit of a 747, only way more hi-tech. And I'm thinking to myself, *Holy shit! These dogs were our pilots?*

"General Vandersen somehow used telepathy to answer me back: *Best damn pilots you'll ever meet*, he said inside my head. *A trip to the Moon, for them, is just like mowing the lawn. We call 'em Mutt and Jeff.* I could hear the General's voice even though his mouth wasn't moving. The dogs waved at me then with their big furry paws and I swear they both had the biggest shit-eating grins when they telepathically said, *Hey Skeeze, how's it hangin'?*"

"You're kidding," I say.

"Yeah, they acted like they already knew me - like we were old friends!"

"See?" James says to me. "Dogs piloting a UFO. How freakin' insane is that?"

"It's insane enough that no sane person would ever think of making it up and swearing it was true," I say. "So maybe it really happened."

"Thank you, Crash!" says Skeeze, feeling vindicated. He leans over and slaps me a high-five.

"I'm assuming they were aliens, rather than actual dogs," I say. "Maybe they were just mentally projecting an image that you wouldn't find threatening."

"It's funny you should say that," says Skeeze, "because it's a clue to what happened next. After General Vandersen led us off the ship, he dropped us off in a big white room with a bunch of Golden Retriever puppies in it: cute, fuzzy, totally

normal-looking puppies – about forty or fifty of ‘em. The General told us to just play with the puppies for a while and he’d come back for us later. After he left, Coyote started growling at the puppies whenever they got too close to him, which was weird, because Coyote’s usually pretty good with other dogs – especially little ones. The cow didn’t seem to like the puppies, either. But Josh and me, we just sat on the floor and let the puppies jump all over us, licking us, cuddling with us, wagging their furry little butts at us....”

“Sounds adorable as fuck,” says James.

“It totally was!” Skeeze agrees. “I laid down so they could climb all over me and, man, they just dog-piled me. I felt like I was getting buried in puppies. It made me so happy I started laughing. But then the puppies started feeling all cold and damp and slimy – and I wasn’t laughing anymore. I was scared shitless.”

“Why? Because the puppies turned into killer frogs from Mars?” That’s James again, smirking.

“No. The puppies turned into *aliens*! Big-headed, grey baby aliens with lipless little mouths and black glassy eyes – just like at the end of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.”

“What’s so bad about that?” I ask Skeeze, half in jest. James starts to cackle in the background

“What’s so bad? Shit, man! They were crawling all over me with their fucked-up froggy skin, pinching me with their spindly, six-fingered, froggy hands – and the whole time they were all whining inside my head, going, *Daddy, daddy, daaad-dy!*”

James bursts out laughing.

“So you got scared because you realized you had a bunch of alien kids,” I surmise.

“What about your frog-cunted alien wife?” James asks. “Is she suing your ass for E.T. support?”

“I don’t *have* an alien wife,” Skeeze says, his voice trembling with something like righteous indignation. “Don’t you get it? They used my sperm to make a bunch of alien-human hybrid test tube babies!”

“But how’d they get your sperm?” I ask.

“Obviously, I’d been abducted before.”

“Obviously.” James seems unconvinced.

“That’s why those dog pilot dudes knew me.”

“Sure, trust the dog UFO pilots,” James scoffs. “Why would *they* lie to you?”

“You can be such an insensitive ass sometimes, James,” Skeeze huffs.

“Hey, that reminds me... did they stuff a greasy electro-genital stimulator up your butt to get you to ejaculate? My uncle told us that’s how it’s done – because abducting people, then handing them the latest issue of *Hustler* along with a Dixie cup and telling them to go jack off in the UFO’s bathroom wasn’t working out so well, I guess.”

“How they got my sperm is between me and the aliens,” Skeeze says. “I refuse to talk about it.”

“Oh, you got anal-probed for sure, dude. No question.”

“Maybe those alien-human hybrid babies weren’t really yours,” I say, hoping to salvage some of Skeeze’s battered dignity. “Did they look anything like you?”

“Actually, yeah, a few kinda did,” Skeeze admits, stroking his beard. “Some of ‘em had straggly red hair on their chins. And this one little dude, who must’ve been a

teenager, had the balls to telepathically ask me if I was carrying any weed."

"So that one got the stoner gene, at least."

"Yeah, I must've passed it along," Skeeze shrugs. "Anyway, I found a nice fatty in the pocket of my sweatpants that I'd kind of forgot about, until then. So I sparked it up and passed it around. After that, I wasn't so scared anymore. There's something very cool about getting high on the Moon. And it turned out those little frog bastards weren't so bad, after all. All they really wanted was some hugs."

"So your alien abduction story has a happy ending," I say.

"Uhm, not really. It had more of a nightmare ending, actually... because when General Vandersen came back he had two walking mattresses with him."

"Like Sealy Posturepedics," James clarifies for me, cracking up again.

Skeeze bristles. "I didn't say what *brand* they were, douchebag. I just saw mattresses - probably queen-size - walking upright. Kind of like the brooms in that Disney movie, *Fantasia*, when Mickey Mouse was the Sorcerer's Apprentice. I know that sounds weird, like the dog pilots, but it's what I saw."

"Another mental projection, maybe?" I ask.

"Abso-*fucking*-lutely," Skeeze says, "because after the mattresses had been standing around for a while, they shape-shifted into their true form."

"Which was?"

"Two evil-looking lizard dudes about nine-feet tall."

“Reptilians?” I ask, thinking of Lloyd’s tales of the Anunnaki.

“Whatever, man. It was like a gorilla fucked a crocodile – or Arnold Schwarzenegger got his molecules fused in a telepod with a really nasty pair of Komodo dragons. They had slit pupils for eyes, bleeding hate all over the place. I could barely stand being in the same room with them.”

“Did they say anything to you?”

“I’m not even sure they could talk. They just ignored me and Josh and all the little alien kids. They were way more interested in the cow.”

“I can already guess, but what’d they do to the cow?”

“Oh, you’ll love this...” James says, leaning back in his chair with a smug grin.

“Basically, they levitated the cow about three feet off the ground, somehow,” Skeeze tells me, “and then they started fucking the hell out of her. Tag-teaming her, actually – one going doggy-style up the cow’s ass while the other was getting a wet, sloppy cow blowjob. It was totally gross! They had these stiff, scaly lizard dicks, at least two feet long and kind of corkscrewy. They would’ve torn any normal woman apart, but I guess a cow could take it – barely.”

“See, Crash? Alien porn...” James says. “How sick is that?”

“It was mega-sick,” says Skeeze. “I’ve seen some mighty perverted shit in my time, like Japanese manga – tentacle fucking at its finest – but this was the sickest shit by far. Those crocodile-maniacs were really getting off, hunched over that poor floating cow, slamming their lizard dicks in and out of her while they screeched and hooted like howler monkeys. It was the most fucked-up thing I’ve ever seen in

my life. I wanted to put my hands over the glassy black eyes of the alien kids, so they wouldn't be exposed to it."

"Your paternal instincts were kicking in there, Skeeze," I observe. "Maybe they really *were* your alien-human hybrid kids, after all."

"Yeah, well, fortunately - or *unfortunately* - they didn't seem all that bothered by it. It was like they'd seen it all before. But the cow, man, she was out of her mind with terror: mooing, pissing, kicking, trying to run away... and I started thinking maybe that was the whole point of it. Because right after the lizard dudes shot their lizard loads, they stood aside with their dicks still dripping splooge, and all the alien kids ran over to suck at the cow's udder. It was a total feeding frenzy! General Vandersen looked over at me then and he said, inside my head, *Fear is mother's milk to them. It's what they eat up here*. He told me that the fear hormones, or whatever, got dumped into the cow's milk while she was getting raped - and I guess even alien-human hybrid kids need to eat, so maybe I shouldn't judge - but seriously, how screwed-up is that?"

"It's udderly horrific," says James, who's not above making an occasional bad pun.

"It sounds like they were feeding on Loosh," I say. "Although since they're half-human, they probably need the milk, too."

"And some other bits," Skeeze adds, rather ominously. "After the alien kids sucked down every last drop of milk they could get, the lizard dudes whipped out some *Star Wars*-looking light sabers and hacked off the cow's udder while she was still alive. They got her tongue and carved out her sperm-blasted rectum, too. I started shaking a little as the cow died. I thought I might puke. It was too much for

me. All the cow parts went on the floor and the alien kids snarfed them right up with their pointy little teeth. General Vandersen told me they did that to eliminate any potential DNA evidence, so the cow's carcass could be taken back to Earth."

"Why bring the mutilated carcass all the way back here?" I ask. "It seems like a waste."

"I know. I asked the General about it. I was like: 'Why not get some steaks out of the deal? Or at least grill up some hamburgers?' And he said the aliens would drink all the cow's blood before they got rid of it, but the flesh didn't have enough *fear* in it to make it worth eating for them. I think there must be some other reason, though. I have a hard time believing those nine-foot-tall lizard fucks got that way just by eating veggies."

"They got that way by eating Loosh," James says to him.

"Yeah, Crash mentioned that already. What the hell is Loosh?"

So we explain Loosh to him. As a testament to Skeeze's peculiar form of intelligence, he gets it right away.

"So what you're saying is... fear, hatred, sickness, death... it's all food to them. The aliens feed off our negative emotional states - "

"- like transdimensional vampires," I fill in. "Or *mind parasites*, as Colin Wilson calls them."

"So how do we protect ourselves?"

"From what?"

"The Loosh-eaters?"

"I don't know if we can," I say. "If they're transdimensional, they don't really 'exist' in the three-

dimensional Cartesian matrix of our objectivity-based worldview. They might be coming to us from a shadow reality where time, for instance, would be multi-dimensional to them – with multiple entry points – so they’d pretty much have us beat right there. And we seem to generate Loosh no matter what. So maybe the only real choice we can make is whether we’re going to generate negative Loosh, through fear, or positive Loosh, through love. But if we’re being farmed for Loosh by entities that prefer to feed off negative Loosh, like Robert Monroe suggested, then maybe even that choice is ultimately beyond us.”

“Let’s hope not,” says Skeeze.

“Yeah, let’s hope....”

“One thing I can tell you is they’re not all bad,” Skeeze says in a thoughtful mood. “On the way back to Earth, Josh asked the dog pilots if they could drop him off in Belize so he could chill in the rain forest for a while, and they said, ‘Sure. *No problemo....*’ I got a postcard from him a few years ago. He’s married to some rich old lady down in Costa Rica now. That’s why I thought I might sail down there this summer. I want to drop in and say hello.”

“So they steal your sperm and pump you for Loosh,” I say, “but at least you get free UFO tickets to anywhere in the world.”

“Yeah. It’s not such a bad deal, when you look at it that way.”

“You guys are so fucking deluded,” James sneers. “You don’t have a clue what this is all really about. It sure as hell isn’t about Loosh.”

“It’s not?” I ask James.

“Well, not totally,” he backpedals. “It was a MILAB operation – a military abduction. That black triangle was an ARV – an alien reproduction vehicle. We’ve had ‘em since the sixties. And Skeeze didn’t see any *real* aliens. Instead, he got sandbagged by a psychotronic weapon that messed with his consciousness, making him see dogs and mattresses, and then every time he saw something that *he thought* was an alien, what he was really seeing instead was a PLF – a programmed life form – that the military makes with its own secret special sauce in a cloning lab. They’re doing it so they can condition humanity to accept the costs of a trumped up interplanetary war.”

“Whoa... hold on. What’s with all the weird acronyms all of a sudden?” I ask James. “Have you been talking to Lloyd?”

“Hell yes, I’ve been talking to Lloyd. Alien abductions are his new area of expertise. He’s part of a secret government task force called the Collins Elite. They’ve been trying to figure out the aliens’ agenda.”

“And what have they figured out so far?” I ask, feeling like I’ve been played.

“Two things...” says James, radiating smugness. “Most of the abductions are military-sponsored and totally fake. And the aliens that are real aren’t really aliens – they’re demons.”

OBE-123: ALIENATING BEHAVIOR

There are a few things you should know about the alien abductors that people like Skeeze have encountered:

As we've already mentioned, Earth is actually teeming with alien spirits incarnated in human form. But aliens as aliens - as smut-fed, little grey gremlins, or well-hung reptilian cattle-mutilators - those aliens, like us, are entities from the Other Side. Unlike us, their relationship to humanity is primarily adversarial. While we come as unseen educators, always careful not to interfere with human sovereignty in thought and deed, they arrive as freaky-looking exploiters.

To call them demons is not far off the mark.

They're all Archons of one sort or another, of course, but every one of them has power enough to cross over from the Other Side and interact with the physical world, which makes them - from our perspective - very powerful indeed. Like all Archons, they refuse to reincarnate, but these Archons, in particular, are fanatically determined to interbreed with human beings.

What you have to understand is that the Archons are fallen - spiritually cut-off from the Divine Source, or the True God, or whatever you want to call that ultimate force for good in the multiverse. To put the situation in (rather limiting and simplistic) Judeo-Christian terms: the Archons have sinned on such a vast scale that they believe they can no longer be forgiven. However, the Archons who cross

over to Earth as aliens have the curious notion that they can somehow redeem themselves, or at least their progeny, by systematically interbreeding with the human species. The ultimate goal is to create Archon-human hybrids that look no different than people walking around with purely human DNA. On a neurological level, however, the hybrids are expected to be radically different, and that difference could end up being as devastating to the human species as the Spanish conquistadores were to the Aztecs in the early-sixteenth-century. If the Archons get their way, you can say goodbye to Homo sapiens - which might not be an entirely bad thing....

Throughout human history (but especially ramping up with the Nazis during World War II), the Archons have provided the Dark Brotherhood's military and intelligence services with dangerous extraterrestrial technologies to fool around with in secret. In return, those same military and intelligence services have helped the Archons to semi-secretly fool around with the Earth's inhabitants. This Faustian bargain - unprecedented knowledge in exchange for damnation - has made it possible for a privileged, opportunistic minority of psychopathic personalities to exert undue control over the majority of humankind. But at least you get computers, fiber optics, the Internet, iPhones, and sexbots out of the deal, which can be put to good use occasionally.

(Although be careful with the sexbots... prolonged exposure to them can result in sleeplessness and a pathological dread of human genitalia.)

The Archon breeding program is expected to achieve its ends sometime in the late-twenty-first-century. Although we already know the outcome of that program, we're not

allowed to tell you about it, because such knowledge could unduly influence the course of human events. But we can give you a hint. It's something that Lloyd Marrsden said to us, just before we shed our human skins:

"Punishment or banishment will never vanquish the Spirits of Darkness. It's only when Light enters evil, and illuminates it from within, that evil is redeemed and thereby overcome."

So there you go... make of it what you will.

A GEODESIC DOME OF ONE'S OWN

Back at the offices of the *Cambria Insurrectionist*, Nora and I go over the notes from my interview with Skeeze while James disappears into the darkroom to develop his film. "I think you have a local color piece on your hands," Nora says airily. "I would write it up as a brief sketch of two antagonistic Cambrians connected by fate and the gory enigma of mutilated Guernseys. But if you want to put some more effort into it, we might be able to run it as a feature. It's up to you."

"I was thinking I'd play up the alien angle. Maybe ask around and see if anyone else has seen a UFO or been abducted lately." I'm definitely leaning toward the feature story.

"I shudder to think what you might discover," says Nora, hunching her shoulders, "but if you're determined to go that route, you might want to start at The Sow's Ear. Some of my best stories have been inspired by the Runyonesque characters who like to sit and talk while they drink too much around The Sow's Ear's hammered copper bar. It's our local version of the Algonquin Round Table."

"I should probably figure out where I'll be sleeping tonight before I head into another bar and make a complete ass of myself again."

"Never fear making an ass of yourself, Gordon. Journalists must be absolutely shameless in their pursuit of absolute truth," Nora pontificates.

“Did Damon Runyon say that?” I ask her. “Or was that Hunter S. Thompson?”

“That’s one of my own nuggets of wisdom,” she admits, blushing. “Here’s another: If you want to be a successful writer or artist, you should avoid committed relationships. You can have all the sex you want, but romantic entanglements take too much time away from the act of creation. You might do well to follow the example of the painter Robert Henri, who limited his erotic encounters to chambermaids and prostitutes.”

“Wow, Nora... my first day on the job and you’re already telling me to go fuck a whore.”

“Oh, no. Don’t take it that way. I’m just projecting a bit here, I’m sure. I see so much potential in you, Gordon. I’d hate to watch you go through the same mundane miseries that I’ve encountered. I, too, once had youthful fire and a way with words, but I married too young and swept all my artistic ambitions under the rug of domestic tranquility.”

“But marriage doesn’t always kill ambition, does it? I mean, what about Joan Didion and old what’s-his-name? – that other famous writer.”

“John Gregory Dunne. They’re the exception that proves the rule, I’m afraid. Frankly, after twenty-five years of marriage, I’m amazed that either of them gets anything done.”

“So I take it you’re not married at this point?”

“Good lord, no! My ex-husband, Julian, was an utter madman – a talented filmmaker who threw it all away on Transcendental Meditation and the ravings of Baba Ram Dass. He lives in a trailer park down in Carpenteria now, surviving off nuts and berries and the occasional abalone.

He thinks of himself as a seer.” Shaking her silver hair, Nora mutters ruefully: “Julian... if not for him, I could have had a promising career as a novelist.”

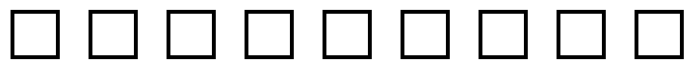
“That bum!” I say with a grin. “If you want, me and James will go down there and beat the holy hell out of him for you.”

Nora grins back at me, shaking her head. “Oh, I know, I know... the existential responsibility is all mine for what I have and haven’t done with my life. I can’t go blaming other people.”

“But it always feels good to try,” I say encouragingly.

“As for where you might sleep tonight, I’ve been giving that some thought.” Nora reaches for her stack of yellow Post-it notes. “You should go see my friend Wanda Mundo. She’s an independent real estate broker who’s one of our more faithful advertisers. I’ve already spoken to her about you. She says she has a charming little cabin for rent that might be just what you’re looking for. Here’s her address...” peeling me a Post-it. “If it works out, we’ll try to barter for Wanda’s commission. It would be good to be settled so you can sit down and start writing, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it would,” I agree. It goes without saying that I’m finding it somewhat unsettling to be constantly hanging around with James.



So that’s how I find myself following Wanda Mundo’s big lumpy polyester-clad butt as it hippo-humps up a nine-story flight of rickety stairs that climb a steep, kudzu-covered bluff overlooking Moonstone Beach Drive. Perched high on

pilings at the top of those stairs is a cedar-shingled geodesic dome cabin with a large redwood deck thrust out in front of it like a lewd, lapping tongue.

Wanda is breathing hard by the time we reach the tiny balcony that leads to the cabin's Chinese red lacquer front door. The door has several leaded glass panes of varying sizes set in a pattern reminiscent of a painting by Mondrian. The red lacquer nicely complements the dark brown, weathered shingles – or at least I think so. Somehow, it makes me feel at home.

“Those stairs’ll keep you in shape,” Wanda pants as she pushes her frizzy blonde perm out of her face and fumbles with the lockbox containing the cabin’s spare key. “You can see now why I won’t show this place to just anyone. A young couple with a baby, for instance... there’s no way.”

I turn and admire the view. The cabin overlooks Moonstone Beach and the Santa Rosa Creek estuary. I can smell the tang of kelp beds and barnacles on the damp ocean breeze and see, far below us, the waves churning in the rocky tide pools just offshore.

“How long has it been on the market?” I ask.

“About three months.” The key from the lockbox slides into Wanda’s palm and she uses it to open the door. “I won’t lie to you,” she says. “There’s no washer-and-dryer – and hauling your laundry and groceries up those steps can get to be a chore. On the other hand, the views are out of this world and if you end up liking the place, I can rent it to you for a good price.”

We go inside. The cabin is basically one large, domed room constructed of redwood beadboard laid behind a honeycomb grid of exposed beams. Long strings of Tibetan

prayer flags and red paper Chinese lanterns are draped from the rafters. At its highest point above the heart-of-pine plank floor, the dome must be over twenty feet tall.

Several large triangular skylights provide the room with plenty of light. There are also two stained glass windows. In the transom above the double french doors that lead out onto the deck, there's a child-like leaded rendering of the sun with flowery apricot-colored spikes. Over on the far wall, a smiling crescent moon of opalescent ivory rises from shards of deep cobalt blue in a hexagonal frame.

Beneath the moon window, a redwood bed has been made up with two fluffy white pillows and a goose down comforter. Diagonally across the room from the bed, a sturdy-looking hammock arcs between two supporting beams near the french doors, about midway up the wall. It's lined with thick fur blankets that look like they've been sewn together from old wolf pelts.

The space between the hammock and the bed is filled with kilim upholstered chairs, a shabby brown leather couch, a coffee table of shellacked knotty pine, and a small rolltop desk displaying a vintage Olivetti typewriter.

Toward the back, I see a small open kitchen with a cast-iron wood-burning stove, some glass-fronted cabinets, a refrigerator, a toaster, and a stainless steel sink. Suspended above the sink is a rack of copper pans, a rope of garlic, and another rope of dried red peppers.

A door next to the kitchen leads to a limestone-tiled bathroom with a toilet, sink, and stand-up shower. To the right of that is the room's most impressive feature: a beautifully carved, built-in redwood bookcase stacked with encyclopedias, reference works, hardcover fiction, poetry, plays, and a whole shelf full of record albums in glassine

sleeves. A high-wattage stereo system is enshrined at the center of the bookcase, connected to a pair of Klipsch speakers mounted in the uppermost corners.

"It looks like someone already lives here," I say.

"It's just like I said on the way over: it comes fully furnished," Wanda tells me. "The owner kept this place for years as his weekend getaway. He's a sound engineer down in Los Angeles... does something with movies. But he got married a while back and now he has two little daughters. This place has gotten too small for the whole family - and too dangerous, with all the stairs. So he's decided to rent it out. He's not interested in selling. He still thinks he might retire here someday if the marriage ever goes sour."

"What are the chances of that happening?"

"Slim to none. I've met the wife and she's just a sweetheart. So I'd say you can count on staying here as long as you want, if you keep up with the rent."

Wanda opens the french doors that lead onto the deck and motions me through them, hoping to seal the deal with the view. She obviously knows her business.

"So how much is the rent?" I ask. Seagulls are wheeling in the pale, hopeful blue sky above us, their cries providing the perfect accompaniment to the distant pounding of the surf.

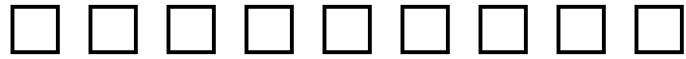
"It's \$500 a month. A steal, if you ask me."

That comes to more than half my monthly salary from the \$5.50 an hour that Nora's paying me. I want to live within my means - and with the remaining three or four hundred dollars a month I should be able to do that, barely - but I remind myself that I have some money in my brokerage account to fall back on if something unforeseen causes me

to blow my budget. I really don't have to spend much time thinking about the decision:

"I'll take it," I tell Wanda.

"I knew you would," she says. "Welcome to Cambria."



Wanda and I meet up again half an hour later at Nora's office, where I sign a one-year lease with an option to renew. As promised, Nora gets Wanda to waive her commission in exchange for a string of future ads in the *Cambria Insurrectionist*. All I have to come up with is the first month's rent and a small security deposit. I write out a check to Wanda's real estate company and she hands me two sets of keys. I'm all set.

The sun is hanging low over the Pacific by the time we conclude our business. James has already gone home, Nora informs me. She asks if I'll need any help with the move. I tell her I should be fine: everything I own is already packed into the back of my Jeep and there's nothing I won't be able to carry up the stairs by myself. For the most part, it's just a lot of books, camping equipment, and old clothes.

Back at the cabin, I park in a sandy turnout near the base of the stairs and drop the Jeep's tailgate so I can start unpacking. The first thing I pull out is an elegant red lacquer trunk that I found a few years ago at an Asian antique store up in Monterey. It's the biggest thing I own, aside from the Jeep. I decide to lug it up the stairs right away, before I start to get tired. The trunk contains my favorite books, a Tibetan singing bowl, and the 159-page manuscript of a novel I've been working on called *The Sensuous Hermit*.

The Sensuous Hermit... it was sort of an elaborate practical joke that I'd played on myself. While I was recovering from amnesia at Esalen, writing the manuscript had served as a way to organize my returning memories. I'd structured it around the somewhat daft notion that there are four distinct stages to any successful hermit's life: The Budding Hermit, The Reluctant Hermit, The Traditional Hermit, and The Sensuous Hermit. I conceived of the book as a semi-smutty *Pilgrim's Progress* that follows an alienated young man through childhood (*The Budding Hermit*), sexual maturity (*The Reluctant Hermit*), and existential despair (*The Traditional Hermit*), and then on to something like orgasmic enlightenment (*The Sensuous Hermit*) - but what I was *really* trying to do was make my own dimly recalled experiences fit into an allegorical template, so I could make better sense of them.

I have my doubts about the manuscript's commercial viability. The title alone is probably enough to warrant rejection from most reputable publishing houses. No one wants to be seen reading a book called *The Sensuous Hermit*, with its implications of solitary, hairy-handed masturbation (although that had its uses while I was inhabiting my tiny single room at Esalen...). Now I wonder if I'll ever finish writing it.

Weighed down by the trunk, my climb up the stairs is much harder than I'd anticipated. The next few trips aren't much easier. I find myself wishing James had volunteered to help me with the move, but I'm too proud or stubborn to drive over to his house to recruit him. Being the shy, self-sufficient monster that I am, I eventually get the entire Jeep unloaded and everything up into the cabin. It's nearly dark by the time I finally finish. I'm so tired that I feel on the

verge of hallucinating. The porch lights sparkle at the edge of my vision like the streetlamps in an absinthe-inspired painting by van Gogh.

As my last act before I collapse, I turn on the stereo in the redwood bookcase and put a record on the turntable, selected from the owner's eclectic collection of jazz, classical, punk, and New Wave music (he seems to be one of those rare people, like me, who enjoys listening to both Ravel and Iggy Pop). When I flop down in a forest green Adirondack chair out on the cabin's deck, Debussy's "Arabesque No. 1" is lilting through the wide-open french doors, caressing me like the cool evening breeze that gently strokes my sweaty forehead.

It's a magic moment. I feel lucky to have found a home that seems so well suited to me. I watch as a solitary pelican rides an air current past the cabin on unmoving wings, almost level with the deck's railing in the twilit indigo sky. The soothing, natural music of the surf sounds much closer to the cabin at night. There's a whiff of pine-smoke in the air from someone's fireplace down the road. It feels like I'm on vacation, but this is how I'll be living my life from this day onward.

I let fatigue overtake me. When I close my eyes, cartoonish imagery plays across the curtain of my eyelids: a long black limousine stretches around an invisible corner and morphs into a scraggly bouquet of wildflowers, which then transforms into a bearded hermit's visage, and then into a triumvirate of fountain-spewing gargoyles (one fat, one thin, the third with magnificent tits), then a sunken cathedral, then a mandala, and so on. It occurs to me that I might be receiving symbolic glimpses of my immediate past and future, direct from the Library of Akashic Records.

Or, alternatively, I could be losing my mind....

I've long had a fascination with dreams, hallucinations, and other anomalies of consciousness, ever since the Easter Bunny gave me a serious ass-whipping when I was six years old. My back-of-the-eyelids cartoon has reminded me of a neurosurgeon who gave a lecture at Esalen with his compatriot, Raymond Moody - the guy who writes all those books about near-death experiences, or NDEs, as he calls them. The neurosurgeon (whose name I no longer remember) told the audience that he used to be just a regular old believer in scientific empiricism, convinced that all thoughts originate from inside that three-pound lump of electrified pâté that we call a brain. But his opinion changed when he experienced his own NDE after contracting acute bacterial meningitis, which attacks the cerebral cortex - that part of the brain that's supposed to be in charge of complex cognitive functions like conscious thought. His case was so severe that the glucose level in his cerebrospinal fluid dropped to almost nothing and his brain shut down, putting him in a coma. He had to have a ventilator do his breathing for him for about a week, until the right drugs finally kicked in and he started to recover. But while he was deep in the coma - or so he claimed - the neurosurgeon was having vivid, interactive experiences that involved myriad sensations of sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. He was experiencing something like transcendental synesthesia: "seeing" beautiful melodies appear before him as colors and "hearing" gold and silver arcs of energy that he perceived as sounds. He'd entered a glittering, malleable, sensual world of wonder. He said it was much more vivid and real than anything in his normal waking life. It was as if he'd become fully alive for the first time.

He asked the audience: “So how do I explain such a rich and varied experience, with such vivid auditory and visual components, when the region of my brain that normally handles all that was infected with meningitis and unable to function?”

The neurosurgeon’s own conclusion was that the experience had been very real and it had happened outside his brain – and very likely outside our known, physical universe. Consciousness, he intuited, is not wholly dependent on the brain; on some level it must be able to break free of physical constraints and go off on its own independent journeys.

Sounds about right to me... I think, recalling my own necronautical nightmares, when I wasn’t sure if I was a man dreaming he was a walrus, or a walrus dreaming he was a man.

At that point in my reverie, my head nods to one side and I soar away to the Land of Morpheus.



My first night in my new home passes quietly. I wake up around midnight when my skin registers a chill out on the deck, persuading me to move indoors. Then, after a quick shower, I get into the redwood bed and spend the rest of the night sleeping under the lovely soft warmth of the goose down comforter. I wake up feeling more rested than I’ve felt in months.

Before I get out of bed I try to review my dreams, as I’m in the habit of doing, but all I come up with is a strange string of words adrift in that liminal boundary between sleeping and waking. The words are: *D-Consciousness* and

W-Consciousness. I'm not sure what those terms might signify, exactly, but I write them down in a moleskin-covered dream journal that I keep by my bedside, hoping they'll make sense to me later.

Since I haven't stocked the cabin with food yet, I head downstairs to the Jeep around a quarter past eight and drive back to the same diner that I stopped in on my first day in Cambria - the Cambria Pines Bar and Grill - where I ask for another round of sourdough pancakes and iced peppermint tea from the friendly fry cook with the oddly formal manner of speaking.

"Couldn't stay away, could you, sir?" he asks me with a goofy grin.

"Those are some great pancakes you're making back there," I tell him.

The fry cook gives me a mock salute from the brim of his greasy Oakland A's baseball cap. "Few things in life are more enjoyable than a properly fluffy pancake. I seem to have a knack for making them."

"You sure do. Hey, by the way, I didn't catch your name when I was in here the other day."

"Demian Dragonwagon, at your service."

"Wow! Your parents really named you that?" There's something about the name that seems oddly familiar, as if I'm experiencing a mild case of *déjà vu*.

"Actually, that's my rock star name," Demian explains. "I used to be in a band. Nowadays, most people just call me Double-D."

"I'll use whatever name you like best," I say. "I just moved to town, so you'll probably be seeing a lot of me from here on out."

“Double-D seems easier all around.”

“Okay, so it’s Double-D then. And this band you were in... is there any chance I might’ve heard of it?”

“You might have, sir. I was the bass player for a band called the Slag Ponys.”

“No way! I used to listen to you guys all the time!”

To say that I’m impressed is an understatement. From their base in San Francisco, the Slag Ponys had been a huge influence on the California rock scene during the late-’70s and early-’80s. They were nowhere near so well-known as bands like Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd, but they’d been heroes to my high school friends and me. We’d thought of them as a much-needed antidote to the insipid disco and pop songs that dominated the San Joaquin Valley airwaves in those days. The Slag Ponys had made rock ‘n’ roll sound evil again. There was something menacing just beneath their jangly, fuzzed-out guitars and concussive drumming – something “a trifle too Satanic” as that old monkeyman Mick Jagger used to sing. Maybe it was Demian’s throbbing, submarine-deep bass playing, now that I thought about it. But no, more likely that sense of menace had come straight from the tormented soul of the Slag Ponys’ semi-legendary (now deceased) dark genius, Jonah Mercurius.

Lead singer, lyricist, guitar prodigy, obsessive-compulsive studio wizard – Jonah Mercurius was the Slag Ponys. The other band members were barely mentioned in most media stories about their music (hence my failure to immediately recognize Demian’s distinctive stage name). Jonah had possessed the Byronic good looks of a debonair vampire – and he’d sung like one, too. In songs like “Crushed By Crowds” and “Girlskin Suitcase” he seemed to be singing

about the transvaluation of all values. He'd been hailed as a Nietzsche with a Stratocaster. (Or as Billy Fader's fulsome prose described him in *Creem*: "...a resurrected Jim Morrison with a Ph.D. in Semiotics ethereally acquired from the Sorbonne during his underground respite in Père Lachaise.")

Somewhere along the Slag Ponys' sleazy rise to fame, Jonah had succumbed to the usual tragic artist's drug syndrome, as so many rock stars do. More interestingly, he'd also manifested a flamboyant Stevie Nicks fetish: they'd dated briefly, snorted roughly half a million dollars worth of cocaine together, and then he'd taken to wearing Stevie's lacey bodices and long flowing scarves onstage. His cover version of Fleetwood Mac's "Gold Dust Woman" - sung like an ancient wind demon's howling lament - became one of the Slag Ponys' most enduring hits. Then came the public indecency charges (pissing from the stage in Eugene, Oregon; getting pulled over in a vintage Jaguar XKE convertible on the outskirts of Pebble Beach while driving naked with a hard-on; defecating in the lobster tank at Trader Vic's after downing a dozen Mai Tais in the company of Hunter S. Thompson and Warren Zevon). The semi-obligatory stints in rehab followed. When Jonah looped one of Stevie's long silk scarves around the stone shoulders of the brooding angel looming above the monument to Baudelaire in the Cimetière de Montparnasse and hung himself there on November 22nd, 1983, the music world pretended to be shocked, but his death in some ways had seemed almost inevitable. By dying at the age of twenty-seven, Jonah gained admittance to the infamous 27 Club, that great pantheon of rock stars who'd died at the same age: Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin... and others yet to come.

In my mind, the tale of Jonah Mercurius could be summed up as: live fast and kinky, die young and famous, and leave a shitload of Loosh in your wake.

The soul-sucking gods must have been pleased.

Some conspiracy-minded people believed that Jonah Mercurius had been murdered – possibly by a hit man hired by a vengeful Stevie Nicks – but the Parisian coronial inquest had concluded after an autopsy that it had been a case of autoerotic asphyxiation gone awry, nothing more. One of Stevie's black lace garters had been found wadded in the back of Jonah's throat. At the time of his death, he had also been wearing one of her gauzy gypsy skirts, *sans* undergarments, thereby generating a persistent bit of rock 'n' roll folklore:

When his neck snapped in the noose, Jonah had supposedly ejaculated with such force that his semen blasted out past the perimeter of Baudelaire's monument and landed in the rocky soil, where a fertile mandrake plant now grew. If you were a rock fan still in your teens and brave enough to enter Le Cimetière du Montparnasse at midnight during a full moon to dig up the mandrake and ingest its hallucinogenic, vaguely human-shaped roots, then you, too, could have a brief but glamorous career as a doomed rock star.

It made me wonder: Did people like Jonah Mercurius make a deal with the devil – or some other intelligent, malevolent entity – prior to incarnating on Earth? Were they possessed, from birth onward, by some demonic spirit that escorted them along the path toward self-destruction? In exchange for riches and fame and sexual excess, did they agree to die early, at the peak of their creative powers? Was it like having the spiritual equivalent of a Loosh-

denominated credit card? (“Be a rock star now; choke on your own vomit later....”)

In other words, do some souls come pre-sold?

“So you used to hang out with Jonah Mercurius... what was that like?” I ask Double-D, the rock-star-turned-fry-cook. It occurs to me that I might just be dealing with a pathological liar.

“I hung out with him, sir, as much as anyone could ever hang with Jonah, I suppose. Most of the time, he wanted to be left to himself. But I was there... and I have the pictures to prove it.” He points to a framed glossy photo above the radio next to the cappuccino machine. The photo has captured two longhaired sweaty men singing into a microphone on a magenta-lit stage. The handsome one on the left is without a doubt Jonah Mercurius. The bearded one on the right is... yes, quite possibly, a shaggier and somewhat younger version of the man standing in front of me.

“If you were in the Slag Ponys, what’re you doing working here?”

“The short answer is that I’ve seen way too much rock ‘n’ roll weirdness – especially all the weird viciousness that manifested right around the time that Jonah died – and it made me desire a much simpler life.”

“I guess being a fry cook beats the shit out of being a rock star in the Simpler Life Department.”

“Honestly? Becoming a short-order cook was just sheer dumb luck. I bought this diner as an investment a few years ago when I moved to Cambria to get away from my previous lifestyle. But it’s hard to find good help, so I often ended up working the grill – and I’ve found that I enjoy it. I was a

good bass player, but I like to think I'm an even better fry cook."

"I wouldn't be too sure... your bass playing was flat-out awesome. There was nobody better."

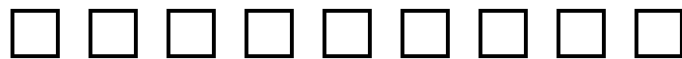
"Thank you, sir."

"But I can see how being in the Slag Ponys must've been totally weird and stressful."

"It was, but it wasn't the weirdest thing that's ever happened to me."

"Really? So what was...?"

That's all it took to get Double-D to tell me about his UFO encounter in Ohio, a story so relevant to the newspaper article I would be writing that it left me wondering again, for the second time since meeting the well-mannered fry cook: was it just a coincidence, or was he part of a mind-fucking conspiracy masquerading as the fickle finger of fate?



"Well, it seems James won't be working with us anymore," Nora says in lieu of a greeting as I walk into her office on Monday. "He tendered his resignation this morning."

"That pussy..." appends a slim, muscular man of about thirty with a long blonde ponytail who stands beside Nora's desk wearing sawdust-spattered jeans and a blue-green flannel shirt with rolled up sleeves. Nora introduces him to me as her son-in-law, Harley.

"I was hoping you'd let Harley teach you some rudimentary darkroom skills today."

"Sure..." I say to Nora, "but what happened to James?"

"He called about an hour ago to tell me that his radio show schedule conflicts too much with the hours our newspaper would require of him. But more than anything, I think he was just embarrassed."

"Genius-boy forgot to pull the dark slide out of his film back on that fancy Mamiya the other day, so all the stuff he shot out at the ranch came up blank," Harley explains.

James has never been good about owning his mistakes, as I recall. *So there goes the Crash and James journalistic tag team*, I think to myself. *Oh well....*

"Harley has been working without pay as our staff photographer for the past year," Nora says to me, "but his tree surgery business is requiring more and more of his time, so we need someone in his place. If it's not going to be James, then I think that *you* might be the ideal candidate."

"More like the *only* candidate," says Harley.

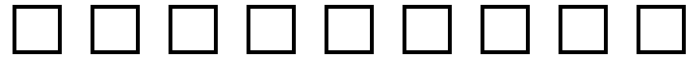
"But I don't know anything about darkroom work."

"It's not hard to learn," he tells me. "It's kind of like baking a cake. I can teach you everything you need to know in just a few afternoons."

"I guess I'm up for it then."

"Try to muster a little more enthusiasm," Nora chides me. "This could turn out to be the best thing that's ever happened to you."

I don't see it that way, but as I trudge off toward the darkroom behind Harley's bobbing ponytail, I find myself hoping that Nora's prediction somehow turns out to be right.



It seemed like alchemy, watching a silver gelatin print come up in a developer tray under the red safelights. I immediately became fascinated by the whole process. Harley turned out to be the ideal teacher for me, dispensing his accumulated years of darkroom wisdom in a series of informal afternoon lectures accompanied by the happy, throbbing beats of the reggae that he liked to listen to while he worked (King Tubby, Lee “Scratch” Perry, and Eek-A-Mouse seemed to be his particular favorites...). In less than a week’s time, I was developing my own film and making glossy, dot-screened prints to run in the newspaper.

Nora immediately started sending me out on assignments with an old manual-focus Minolta attached to a psychedelic embroidered guitar strap that might have once belonged to Carlos Santana. According to her, the resulting images came back looking far better than anyone could have reasonably expected. Soon I was shooting the majority of the *Insurrectionist’s* photos and doing all of the darkroom work.

I also started helping out with the weekly production paste-up, which introduced me to the rest of the *Insurrectionist’s* staff. Nora’s daughter, Calliope (married to Harley), was the Head of Production Design. Calliope had a wild mane of auburn hair, beautiful periwinkle eyes, and a wide, rubbery mouth that was always laughing or ordering me around with a loopy Zsa Zsa Gabor-inspired accent (“*You vill enjoy verking here, darlinck! Come, there is much learning to be done!*”). A skinny, bulimic blonde from New Orleans named Bitsy Metcalf was the newspaper’s Advertising Manager. When Bitsy wasn’t taking her small

town ad clients out to lunch (and forcing herself to throw up afterward), she devoted most of her spare time to the animal rescue shelter that she ran out of her backyard; she was said to be especially good with broken-winged owls and motherless coyote pups. I also met Chad Hutchinson, the sullen, twenty-year-old delivery truck driver and general office maintenance man; Nelson J. Lyons, a retired airline pilot who was in charge of Classifieds and the Sports page; and gossipy, middle-aged (and fading fast) Victoria Langley, who had some vague, unspecified connection to the newspaper that required her to show up every now and then with a cheese tray and a few bottles of cheap wine.

My social circle expanded even further when I started hanging out with Bitsy at The Sow's Ear after work. Just as Nora had promised, The Sow's Ear's hammered copper bar was a gathering place for some of Cambria's most loquacious and eccentric poet-philosophers. Warren Talcott, my marimba-playing pal from Camozzi's, happened to be a regular there. I sat down next to him on my first day in The Sow's Ear and found out that Warren was a well-known California landscape artist whose illustrations often ran in the *Cambria Insurrectionist* – so we were already connected in a strange and synchronistic way. Warren soon introduced me to his friend, Warren Leopold, a white-bearded architect and master carpenter who looked like a Sunday School teacher's conception of God, or a jaded Santa Claus who'd given up on the folly of Christmas. After a few rounds of beers I found out that Warren Leopold was a sort of Zelig of American Literature who'd owned and operated a whorehouse up in Alaska with Dashiell Hammett during World War II, then lived across the street from John Steinbeck during his postwar years in Carmel. He'd also spent several years in Big Sur, where he'd been friendly

with Henry Miller, John Lilly, and the poet Robinson Jeffers. (I later found out that Miller had written of him in *BIG SUR and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*: "If I were running the World Order of Human Merit, I would make Warren Leopold a Chevalier.")

The two Warrens seemed to like me and over the next few days they introduced me to: Danny Lafferty, a wild-eyed ex-journalist from Waco, Texas with a bushy brown walrus mustache and a fondness for telling outrageously bawdy stories in the Pecos Bill vein; Ron Lowe, a gung-ho local contractor with intimidating arm muscles and the face of a deviant show wrestler; and Hiram Moon Buffalo, a former New York City advertising executive – previously known as Hiram Bernstein – who'd spent the last three years living on an Indian reservation in the Los Padres National Forest.

It was Hiram who first piqued my budding journalistic instincts with his Indian anecdotes, told in the dramatic New York City manner, with plenty of wisecracks and exuberant gestures. He said his Indian name had been bestowed on him after he'd gone on a vision quest and had seen something in the forest at night that the locals referred to as a Moon Buffalo, even though it wasn't really a buffalo at all.

"What was it then?" I had to ask.

"A spaceship," answered Hiram, and we were off....

Did it seem odd that I was running into so many people who had UFO stories to tell? Of course it did. But it's my belief that wherever you focus your obsessive attention, you'll find that weird patterns start to emerge. There's an active, imaginative intelligence at large in the universe that likes to play along with us.

The next UFO story came to me in the Cambria Library, while I was checking out books to do further research on the topic. As I was filling out my application for a library card, the chatty town librarian, Lee Ann Webster, decided to get acquainted with me (“Just call me Lee Ann the Librarian. Everyone else does. It’s like Conan the Barbarian, only nicer”). Although her hair was prematurely gray, Lee Ann had youthful-looking skin and a sexy, bombshell figure. As we talked, I tried to guess her age. She was probably just five or ten years older than I was, I thought, judging by her cultural references. She was obviously brainy and I found myself attracted to her.

The feeling might have been mutual because, I swear, I caught her leering at my crotch over the silver wire rims of her granny glasses at one point. All the sexy librarian porn I’d ever been exposed to came roaring back in my memory (the sexy librarian being a distinct porn archetype, like the lascivious schoolteacher, the trampy Catholic schoolgirl, and the pearl-wearing socialite who enjoys being defiled by filthy, well-hung hobos as her tuxedo-clad husband jerks off in the background while standing on an ersatz Louis XIV chair). By the time I slid my completed library card application across the desk, I had a mulish hard-on poking down the left leg of my jeans and Lee Ann’s nipples were visibly erect (no bra). I would have asked her out, right then and there, if it hadn’t been for her horrid breath, which smelled as if she’d eaten a salami sandwich for lunch with a clove of raw garlic on the side and a putrid slice of Gorgonzola for dessert. Even just exhaling through her nose, she put out quite a stink – but I liked her a lot, anyway.

Taking note of the books I intended to check out (Whitley Strieber's *Communion*, John Keel's *Disneyland of the Gods*, and Jacques Vallee's *The Invisible College*), Lee Ann told me that some of the locals had been having picnics way up on Santa Rosa Creek Road just so they could search the skies for UFOs. Many of those same picnickers had returned to the library to report their sightings to her. Most of them described strange metallic orbs hovering in the air, some as big around as hot air balloons.

"Although they definitely weren't hot air balloons," Lee Ann said, wafting her fetid salami breath my way.

I said I found that very interesting and I asked her if I could come back and interview her for the *Cambria Insurrectionist* someday soon (thinking to myself: *When I'm equipped with some curiously strong breath mints...*). Lee Ann said that would be great. She told me she loved Nora and her uncompromising journalistic screeds. Trying hard not to breathe through my nose, I thanked Lee Ann for the library card and the books – and then I dashed outside to inhale great gulps of fresh coastal air.

Later that same day, I finally got a phone installed in my new home with an unlisted number. The first call I made on it was to James. I invited him to join me for drinks that evening with my new friends at The Sow's Ear, but he turned me down. Camozzi's was his place, he said; he had no use for the crowd at The Sow's Ear. I thought his attitude seemed strange, bordering on hostile, but I didn't have time to dwell on it, because right after James hung up on me, Kayleigh Fuller showed up at my door.



“Well? Ain’t you gonna invite me in?”

Kayleigh stood in my doorway radiating loveliness in the late afternoon sunlight. She was wearing a black leotard and a long, tattered pirate wench skirt in shades of algae green. She led with her breasts – those magnificent, perfectly curved breasts, like the bust of a mermaid carved on the prow of an old whaling ship – but it was her backlit blonde hair and her dimpled smile that really got to me. It was a smile that said, “Do me!”

She was such a beguiling witch. There was no doubt she was casting a spell in my direction – and I had no defense against such a powerful glamour.

Years later, I would run across a line from the cartoonist and keen-eyed satirist, Lynda Barry, which would stick with me for the rest of my life because I found it so funny and apt:

Love is the exploding cigar we willingly smoke.

“Kayleigh! What a great surprise!” I said. “Come on in!”

That was the exact moment I lit up, so to speak.

Ceci n'est pas un ange.



LET'S GET METAPHYSICAL

“I always wanted to live in one o’ these.”

“You mean a geodesic dome?” I ask Kayleigh.

“Hell yeah!” She looks around, scoping out my new place. She especially seems to like the Tibetan prayer flags hanging from the honeycomb rafters. “My Uncle Bucky, man... what a tripster. He came up with the weirdest ideas. Geodesic domes – I mean, who thinks up shit like that?”

“He must’ve been an interesting guy to hang out with,” I say, leading her over to the couch.

“You ain’t shittin’.” Kayleigh nestles down right next to me on the buttery-soft, brown leather cushions. “We used to have this big-ass family reunion every summer. I got, like, two hundred uncles an’ aunts an’ cousins. So all us Fullers’d get together for a picnic an’ Uncle Bucky was always the star o’ the show. Man, I just loved that old guy to death. I mean, I didn’t actually kill him. He died in the hospital... had heart attack while he was babysittin’ his wife, Anne, who was in a coma. She died right after him. Sixty-six years, they was married. It was so sweet. I always thought Bucky went first so he could get the Other Side all ready an’ make it nice for her, so she wouldn’t be freaked out by bein’ dead an’ all.... But anyway, what was I sayin’? Oh yeah! The picnics! When I was a little girl I used to sit on Bucky’s knee an’ jus’ stare up into that big ol’ craggy face of his and – oh man, he was so great, the way he explained things an’ stuff. Like, he said we should say ‘sunsight’

instead a 'sunrise' and 'sunclipse' instead a 'sunset' 'cuz the sun don't really rise or set - it's just us comin' around to see it again 'cuz o' how the Earth spins on its axis. Know what I mean?"

"Sure," I say, although that's not entirely true. My mind is elsewhere, wandering around in a kind of dazed pussy trance.

"I hope you don't mind me bargin' in here like I done."

"No... I'm glad you came."

"Good! When Francesca told me you done rented this place, I just had to check it out. 'Sides, you're still new in town. I thought you might be feelin' a little lonely." The wet pout of her lip gloss is making her mouth look like a piece of candy.

"You're right," I tell her. "I could definitely use some company." I flash on my unfinished manuscript, *The Sensuous Hermit*. She has no idea....

"Cute guy like you won't be on the market for long. I figured I better get here quick."

Kayleigh leans in and kisses me then - and just like that, I find myself with an armful of warm girl.



After watching the 'sunclipse' over the Pacific from my balcony... after a meal of store-bought lasagna washed down with a bottle of Chianti... after she whispers to me: "You don't need to worry. I can't get pregnant. We can do anything..." after I pull off her black lace panties and go down on her nubby and eager pink clit until her back arches, her pussy tightens around my two fingers, and her

thighs clamp down over my ears, muffling her groans of pleasure... after a few hours spent fleshing out some of the more esoteric pages from the *Kama Sutra* with Alice Coltrane on the stereo, *Journey in Satchidananda*, followed by Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden*... after all that, and much more that's indescribable, the evening finally ends almost where it began, with Kayleigh curled up beside me on my narrow redwood bed, telling me about her famous uncle:

"Bucky's life wasn't easy, y'know..." she says. "When he was in his thirties he went bankrupt, one o' his daughters died from polio, an' he damn near committed suicide."

"Really? I had no idea."

"Yeah. You shoulda heard him tell it. The man went through some nasty shit. But just as he was gonna, like, jump off a bridge or somethin', he got hit with this big revelation. Get this: he figured his life wasn't his to just toss away like that. It belonged to the universe, see? So he decided, right then an' there, to find out what one totally broke, screwed-up human being could do to help out the whole rest of the world."

"He ended up doing quite a lot."

"You ain't shittin'."

"It's a shame he's not around anymore."

"Yeah... it kinda sucks. Me an' my dad ended up goin' to Bucky's funeral together. They buried him up in Cambridge, near Harvard an' MIT, even though he was livin' down in Pacific Palisades. This was around five years ago: July, 1983. I'd just graduated high school an' I didn't know what the hell I was gonna do next. My dad's an English prof over at West Virginia U - an' he said he could get me in there, if I wanted - but I wasn't sure college was the right thing for

me. Ol' Bucky never made it past his freshman year at Harvard. Didja know that?"

"Nope." I'm really enjoying the way Kayleigh talks. And talks....

"Yep, got kicked out for partyin' too hard. My kinda guy. Anyway, my dad an' me, we talked a lot on the drive up there about what I should do with my life. Had us a real heart-to-heart. And then there was this one little thing that happened that helped decide it for me. Right after the funeral, I saw they'd put up this special granite marker on Bucky's grave, right behind the normal gravestone. You know what it said?"

"I have no fucking clue."

"It said: '*Call Me Trim Tab.*'"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask, baffled.

"It's Bucky's whole philosophy in a nutshell! It's so cool! See, he saw this huge-ass boat goin' by him one day - kinda like the *Queen Mary*, or the *Titanic* or somethin'. I don't know which boat it was, or even when he saw it, exactly. Maybe he saw it on the same day he damn near jumped off that bridge into the ocean, for all I know.... Anyway, this boat started him thinkin' about what one little guy like him could get done. Because that whole big ship was goin' past him an' Bucky realized the only thing steerin' it was the rudder on its ass end. And he knew that on the edge of every big boat's rudder there's this little thing they call a trim tab. It's like a mini-rudder. Just by movin' the little trim tab, you can build up enough low pressure to swing that big rudder around - it don't hardly take no effort at all - and then the big rudder turns the ship. So ol' Bucky, he thought he could be like a human trim tab. Society with all its

bureaucratic government bullshit an' its greedy suck-ass corporations might be flyin' along right past all us little guys, but if you're thinkin' original thoughts an' puttin' 'em out there, like Bucky did, then it's kinda like stickin' your foot out. The whole dang ship of state can get tripped up an' start headin' in your direction."

"So should I start calling you Trim Tab, too?"

"Baby, you just gave me five bone-deep orgasms, so you can call me whatever you want. But if you're lookin' for suggestions, I think you might start by callin' me your girlfriend."

"I'm not sure if I can do that..." I say, mock-pensively.

"You better, fool!" Kayleigh says, slapping me across my bare chest, perhaps a bit harder than she'd really intended. I wince, feigning injury. "Ooh, did that hurt?" She giggles. "Whoops."

"Actually, I think it gave me a partial boner."

Kayleigh rolls over and straddles me. As I slide up inside her wet, silky warmth, she bites her lower lip and murmurs, "Yeah, I guess it did." We're both a little sore, so we take it slow. She looks at me with half-closed eyes - *my god, she's beautiful!* - and we find our rhythm.

"Hey, I meant to ask you..." she says dreamily, "how'd you get them scars all up an' down your chest?"

"I was in a car wreck five years ago, right around the same time your uncle died. In fact, I almost joined him."

"No shit? Maybe you an' him shook hands on the Other Side."

"Maybe. I kind of doubt it though. I was in a coma for thirty-three days and for most of that time I thought I was a

walrus.”

“Goddam you feel good. I’m glad you’re not a walrus anymore.”

“Me, too.”

Some exquisitely pleasurable moments pass as Kayleigh rides me to another intense climax – both hers and mine. In the afterglow, I ask her: “So what’d you decide?”

“Hmm?”

“After you saw Bucky’s *‘Call Me Trim Tab’* monument... what did you decide to do with your life?”

“Oh, yeah. Right. Well, I decided to skip college... I moved to California... became a white witch... and I started sellin’ kick-ass, medical-grade marijuana.”

“That was your Buckminster Fuller inspired plan for your voyage on Spaceship Earth?”

“Damn straight, Ace.”



The next day – a commitment-free Saturday – I wake up beside Kayleigh on a cool, foggy morning. A foghorn is blowing somewhere far up the coast in the mist-shrouded stillness, like some forlorn whale song. The air inside the house is chilly – I must have left a door or a window open – but Kayleigh’s naked body next to mine feels warm and velvety, making me reluctant to get out of bed. I bury my nose in her thick blonde hair, inhaling a fragrant mixture of patchouli, pot smoke, and sex. All my senses are crystal clear, as if a scrim of dullness has lifted that, until now, I hadn’t even been aware of. A tiny bird sends up a joyful twitter from a bush outside and I can hear it hopping from

branch to branch with perfect clarity. My heart thumps with gladness as I tell myself: *This is going to be a very good day....*

Not wanting to break the spell, I remain still and try to recall my dreams. Just prior to waking, I'd been dreaming of a small, cedar-lined room – about the size of a large walk-in closet. The floor of the room had been made of thousands of long-stemmed daisies standing upright, bunched closely together. The daisies were dried out and brittle. There was no way the floor-wide bouquet could have supported my weight, but it just so happened that I was levitating about nine inches above the daisies, seated in the lotus position. Slowly, I started to spin and somersault, tumbling as if I were inside an invisible clothes drier. As I did so, cobweb-like strands of white light gathered out of the air and wrapped around my body like a silk worm's cocoon. As this light-cocoon neared completion, an angry yellow wasp with a huge barbed stinger flew into the room. It buzzed through a crack in the cocoon and landed on my neck, distracting me from my task. As I swatted at the wasp, the dream ended.

I don't feel up to analyzing that one yet, so I just quietly write it down in my dream journal. Then I kiss the delicate peach fuzz on Kayleigh's earlobe to wake her.

"Oh, hey..." she says with a yawn. "So you already got herpes, right?"

What the fuck?! "No. I don't," I say, wondering what I've gotten myself into. I'm feeling betrayed, but at the same time I recognize that I have no one but myself to blame for my coital carelessness.

"Oh well. It don't matter none. I ain't contagious right now, anyway." Kayleigh is utterly nonchalant. "You willin' to

brave a little mornin' breath?" She rolls over and kisses me, pressing her ample breasts against my chest. Her mouth tastes sweet, despite the early hour. As her tongue seeks out mine, she pulls me on top of her.

Despite the herpes bombshell, I've risen with morning wood. My erection is as stiff as a sledgehammer handle – *a full stinger*, as Jack Nicholson once referred to a bit of method acting he was trying to maintain between his legs while shooting a love scene on the set of *Prizzi's Honor*. After my unsettling dream, however, it occurs to me that *I* might be the one who is about to get stung.

Taking the initiative, Kayleigh spreads her legs wide and guides me inside her, burying me to the hilt. The moment doesn't seem right for me to suggest that we might try using a condom. With an adorable little growl, she pulls down hard on my hips and grinds her clitoris against my pubic bone. My dick is in her as deep as it can go. I can feel its spongy tip bumping against her cervix.

"Aahh... yeah... fuck me..." Kayleigh whispers. "*Fuck me hard!*" There's something animalistic about the way she moves, as if she's giving free reign to her inner werewolf. I pull out slowly – feeling the slick, gripping slide – and then plunge back into her. Again and again, picking up speed. She wraps her arms around my back and gives me a deep, trembling French kiss. Her climax is so swift and powerful and *wet* that it takes me by surprise. As she tightens around me and clings – shuddering, jerking, moaning from deep in her throat – I find myself shooting off like some odious premature ejaculator. The violent throbbing seems to last for minutes, rather than seconds, pumping an incredible amount of semen in a chaotic surge toward Kayleigh's uterus.

My thoughts have been blown in a million different directions at once, but one stands out among them: *I hope she wasn't lying to me about not being able to get pregnant... or about being contagious.*

"God~~dam~~, I love mornin' sex!" Kayleigh purrs in my ear as the last twinges of ecstasy leak out of me, leaving me feeling like a spent monster. I find myself wondering who else has been having morning sex with her. I'm already feeling the irrational, unwelcome stirrings of jealousy – not a good sign.

I let out a low, involuntary groan and bury my face in Kayleigh's hair so she won't see my unevolved wretchedness.

Kayleigh places both of her palms on my cheeks and lifts my head back up, so she can look straight into my eyes. "You ever read Richard Brautigan?" she asks me, as if something momentous hangs on my answer.

"Sure," I say. "I've read most of his books, actually." Everyone knows about *Trout Fishing in America*, but his collection of short stories, *Revenge of the Lawn*, happens to be my personal favorite. *Should I tell her that?* I'm trying to figure out where she's going with this.

"Ever read his poems?"

"Uhm, no... not really."

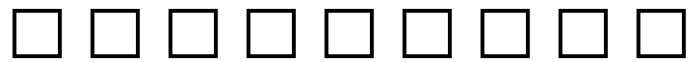
"You should. He has this one poem I love so much, I got it memorized. It goes:

*'Fuck me like fried potatoes
on the most beautifully hungry
morning of my God-damn life.'*"

"Words to live by..." I say.

"I know! *Exactly!* It's, like, the perfect poem. And it makes your life better if you make it part o' your philosophy."

Kayleigh and I spend the next hour making Richard Brautigan's poem part of our shared philosophy. Then, famished, we head out for breakfast.



"This is getting to be a regular occurrence," says Double-D as Kayleigh and I slide into a booth toward the back of the Cambria Pines Bar and Grill. "Good morning, Kayleigh," he adds, touching the brim of his greasy Oakland A's baseball cap. "You're looking lovely, as always."

"'Mornin', D!" Kayleigh greets him with a bright smile. "As you can prob'ly tell, I bagged Crash last night."

"Congratulations! He's quite a trophy."

"You make it sound like she's just come back from a safari," I say, not sure if I should be offended. *How many other trophies has Kayleigh shown off around town like this?* I wonder.

"You can tell that bitch Lee Ann he's off-limits now," Kayleigh says to Double-D as she snuggles up against me. "I know she eats lunch here most every day."

"Salami and Gorgonzola with cornichons on a fresh baguette from the bakery. It never varies," Double-D confirms.

"You're talking about Lee Ann the Librarian?" I ask. It's all starting to make sense to me now.

"That uppity slut damn near told the whole town she was gonna make you her boyfriend," Kayleigh gripes. "I guess you musta stopped by the library yesterday, huh?"

"Yeah... she checked out some books for me."

"Well, that wasn't all she was checkin' out."

"The dating scene around here is like musical chairs," Double-D explains to me. "There aren't enough single men to go around."

"So the men are the chairs and - "

"- an' some skanks think they hafta sit on every one," Kayleigh says with a look of wild vehemence in her eyes.

"I thought she was nice," I say, stepping right where I shouldn't.

"Oh, you would!" Kayleigh yips at me.

"But she had some serious halitosis," I quickly amend.

"That would be the salami and stinky cheese..." Double-D says with a sage nod of his head. "I've tried to get her to try other sandwiches, but she refuses to vary her eating habits."

"That hasn't stopped most guys from gettin' laid by her."

"Kayleigh! You're being catty," Double-D chides her.

"Well, it's true!"

"I must admit, I myself have succumbed to Lee Ann's charms on more than one occasion."

Kayleigh rolls her eyes. "Like that blowjob behind the lunch counter when a whole passel o' church ladies walked in on y'all? That one's classic," she tells me, laughing.

"In my defense," Double-D says with his usual dignity, "it was early Sunday morning after a late night of drinking..."

and I still had the CLOSED sign displayed. But I'd failed to lock the front door."

"You might be a fry cook, but you still got a rock 'n' roll heart," Kayleigh says with a warm smile. "Didja know ol' Double-D here used to be in the Slag Ponys?" she asks me.

"We were just talking about it the other day," I tell her. "Which reminds me... I have a strange question for you, Double-D. I don't know how to say this without sounding stupid, but do you think Jonah Mercurius might've been possessed?"

"What makes you think that, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Just a hunch," I say, refusing to elaborate. That whole concept of Loosh-denominated American Express cards with the slogan: "Be a rock star now; choke on your own vomit later..." - well, it just seems a bit much to explain over breakfast.

"I guess it depends on what you mean by possessed," Double-D says to me, deep in thought. "Are we talking about Linda Blair spinning her head around, spewing green vomit, and using a crucifix for a dildo in *The Exorcist*... *that* kind of possessed?"

"No," I say, "something much more subtle. I'm thinking it might have been more like channeling - allowing his body to be taken over by a spirit, or some otherworldly entity. There's such a high level of *strangeness* to some of Jonah's songs, if you know what I mean. It's almost like he's not entirely human."

"I know *exactly* what you mean. And although I can't say for sure if he was possessed, I can tell you this: Jonah was obsessed with Holotropic Breathwork."

“Like Stan Grof teaches at Esalen?”

It just so happened that during my residency at the Esalen Institute I'd attended a few seminars taught by Dr. Stanislav Grof – the founder and chief theoretician of transpersonal psychology. At some point, he and his wife, Christina, had started inviting me over to their place for dinner, where we'd had several long conversations about Karl Pribram's holographic model of the brain and consciousness (how it was the only model that could adequately explain Jung's observations regarding the collective unconscious, synchronicity, and archetypal encounters, etc.). The Grofs also talked about the psychological breakthroughs they were seeing with Holotropic Breathwork – their own trademarked method of using breathing and other elements, like music, to achieve an expanded state of consciousness without the use of drugs. According to some, holotropic breathing can induce the body's natural equivalent of an acid trip. But when I tried doing it, it just made me dizzy and I threw up.

“Right! Stanislav Grof...” says Double-D. “That's who taught it to him. But Jonah was taking Holotropic Breathwork further than anyone ever had before. He was incorporating it into his singing at concerts.”

Kayleigh asks the obvious question: “So Jonah was trippin' his brains out every time he was up there onstage?”

“That's certainly the way it appeared to me. Toward the end, Jonah was so out of it that he could barely communicate. Sometimes he would spit on me to get my attention while I was playing bass, which I can tell you, I never learned to appreciate.”

“It's hard to look cool with loogies in your beard,” Kayleigh sympathizes.

"I was more afraid of conjunctivitis. I started wearing sunglasses."

"So that's why Jonah was always jerking his limbs around and moving his head so fast that it's just a blur on most of the Slag Pony music videos," I say, remembering. "He was hyperventilating."

"And maybe seein' God," Kayleigh appends.

"Or the devil," says Double-D. "There's one thing the video cameras never caught, and it happened during almost every concert: at a some point, Jonah's skin would start to glow - like he was being lit up from within by thousands of crawling blue fireflies."

That description sends a chill through me. It's at once so hauntingly familiar, and yet so alien, that it steals the savor from my sourdough pancakes and puts me in a contemplative mood for the rest of the day.



Back at my house, Kayleigh makes some tea and then we both sit in the fog-gauzy light squeezing lemon into our mugs and turning the pages of my library books, doing research together for my overdue newspaper article about aliens and UFOs.

In *Communion*, Whitley Strieber seemed convinced that he'd undergone some sort of extraterrestrial-induced weirdness while riding aboard a train as a child in 1956. He'd also experienced some missing time while eating a Swanson's TV dinner back in 1967. Then another four to six weeks went missing while he was traveling around Europe in 1968. And most recently - on December 26th, 1985 - he

claimed he'd been abducted from his cabin in upstate New York by little grey aliens wielding a big anal probe. (None of those events, according to Strieber, could be written off to drugs or psychosis, although skeptical readers were certain to keep those two explanations in mind.)

John Keel was more of a Fortean by disposition, interested in newspaper accounts of unlikely objects falling from the skies (frogs, fish, flying saucers...), mysterious crime waves, Men in Black, snallygasters, mothmen, and a whole assortment of weird, hairy creatures with appalling body odor. His central thesis, echoing Charles Fort, was that "someone else" owns the Earth and uses it as their personal playground - a *Disneyland of the Gods* (or "a celestial Playboy Club..."). It was a dire conclusion, but Keel sounded positively cheerful about it.

Jacques Vallee was far and away the most rigorously academic of the trio. He and a group of fellow scientists had spent much of the sixties and seventies researching UFOs and their influence on human consciousness. Right up until the publication of *The Invisible College*, in 1975, they'd shared their findings in secret to avoid public ridicule and potential damage to their careers. They knew the ruling orthodoxy of their time (modern science and its strict materialism) insisted that UFOs didn't exist and therefore deserved no serious scientific investigation - although Vallee's *Archives of the Invisible College*, in seven bound volumes, proved otherwise.

It was Vallee's mentor - Project Blue Book's scientific adviser, J. Allen Hynek - who'd first suggested they call themselves the Invisible College as a way of telegraphing their interest in a forbidden science that transcends the recognized laws of nature and no longer cordons off the

physical universe from the psychological, social, and *psychic* side of life (the term *psychic*, as defined by Vallee, referring to interactions between consciousness and physical reality). Calling themselves the Invisible College was also a way of showing their solidarity with the original Invisible College - that intellectual community of philosophers, alchemists, and budding scientists that had emerged from the Dark Ages covertly sharing information so as to avoid persecution by the Church (the ruling orthodoxy of *their* time), which had been justifying its sadistic Inquisitions with the Faustian assertion that scientists were in league with the devil.

The scientific achievements of the original members of the Invisible College might have remained invisible if King Charles II hadn't chartered the Royal Society in the 1660's, thus lending the new scientists a certain social respectability. No such respectability had yet been forthcoming for Vallee and his fellow researchers, probably because their findings were too strange to go mainstream in a materialistic society still in thrall to the perversions of late-stage capitalism. As Vallee himself admitted, he was a heretic among heretics whose speculations were likely to "contradict both the ideas of the believers and the assumptions of the skeptics."

There seemed to be two main thrusts to Vallee's speculations: that alien abductions were just a modern variation on the age-old tradition of encountering non-human consciousness in the form of angels, demons, elves, fairies, ghosts, and succubae; and that, collectively, those encounters functioned as part of an elaborate "control system" - a sort of metaphysical thermostat that adjusts the belief systems of the human race over vast expanses of

time, constantly recalibrating the psychic temperature of the universal unconscious so that humanity is never allowed to sink into utter annihilation, but at the same time never allowed to reach its full psychic potential.

Vallee went to great lengths to show how alien abduction stories were in many ways identical to the initiation rites of secret societies and the ancient mystery schools. Both experiences often involved kidnapping, bondage, torture (including terrifying surgical operations), and sexual violation. Both often left scars on the body and the mind. And both often altered the experiencers' perceptions of the world in irrevocable ways, sometimes even bestowing "unusual talents" that made life more complicated for the recipient.

He's right about that... I think to myself, reading. My "unusual talents" haven't done much for me, aside from making my existence more humiliating.

A few minutes later, the phone rings. It's James, in a strangely chipper mood, inviting me over for dinner. It's quite a turnaround from his sullen attitude of the day before. He makes sure to mention, more than once, that I can bring a date - as if he already knows how I'm getting along with Kayleigh.

Living in a small town kind of sucks if you want your private life to stay private, I'm discovering.



"James! Where's the bong?" Francesca shouts from the redwood slab table near the kitchen.

"How the hell should I know? You're the one who had it last," James answers, exasperated. He's on the far side of the great room, inserting a videotape into the VCR. Skeeze has thoughtfully brought over a selection of obscure UFO documentaries to help me with my research. We're about to sit down and watch something called *The Meier Chronicles*. It's about a one-armed Swiss farmer named Billy Meier who has sort of a *paparazzi* relationship with some celebrity-seeking Pleiadians.

"Fuck it," Francesca says. "We'll just get high through an apple." She snatches up a shiny green Granny Smith from a plum-colored ceramic bowl and stabs it with a paring knife, boring a small tunnel through the apple's core to use as a smoke-cooling chamber.

Kayleigh is seated next to Francesca with her head bowed over a bushy stalk of marijuana about the length of a kangaroo's hind leg. She's examining the resin crystals on its buds with an intensity usually only seen in Hasidic diamond merchants bent over their jeweler's loupes.

"I wouldn't light up if I were you," Skeeze cautions Francesca as he steps away from the refrigerator with three cold bottles of Watney's Red Barrel Ale. "You'll get high enough just trimming those buds. The THC from the scissor hash gets in through your skin."

"This shit's the shit!" Kayleigh swears, snipping at the air with a long-handled pair of hair clipping shears to emphasize her enthusiasm. "I can't wait to see how it smokes!"

"All in due time, my dear," says Skeeze, looking suave in his turquoise velveteen smoking jacket, Bermuda Red cargo shorts, and a ratty tan T-shirt that reads I KNOW THE VOICES AREN'T REAL, BUT THEY HAVE SOME GREAT

IDEAS. "First," he says, "we need to cure these honeys for a few weeks. Then you can smoke-out 'til your tits levitate."

Francesca and James are hosting a bud-trimming dinner party in Skeeze's honor. It turns out that Skeeze and Francesca have been instrumental in Kayleigh's Buckminster Fuller inspired plan to become a seller of "kick-ass, medical-grade marijuana." Skeeze is her main supplier and Francesca fronts for her, letting Kayleigh sell Skeeze's product under the table from the flower stand that she owns and operates on the corner of Main Street and Burton Drive.

Now that I'm officially Kayleigh's boyfriend, I've been let in on the whole felonious secret. Big stacks of black Hefty bags stuffed full of dried marijuana stalks surround the redwood table. On the floor next to them sit dozens of old-fashioned Mason jars. Francesca and Kayleigh's job is to cut the buds from the stalks and put them in the Mason jars, where they'll finish curing. It's a laborious task that involves trimming away the many marijuana leaves that surround the buds, but the girls are into it because Skeeze lets them keep "the shake" (the leaves, stems, and broken off bits of buds) as payment. Kayleigh tells me the shake will keep her high for a year if she decides not to sell any of it. The more potent buds are what she'll be dealing from Francesca's flower stand, carefully rolled up inside bouquets of sunflowers and peonies.

"You guys should come have some dinner before you start watching that video," Francesca calls out to James and me.

"Wait? There's dinner?" James asks as Skeeze hands him a beer.

Kayleigh looks up with a scowl from her marijuana buds. "What? Y'all didn't notice me cookin' in here? I been slavin'

away for goddam hours!”

“I thought you were just whipping up another batch of your famous pot brownies,” I say, thinking it best not to appear oblivious – although that’s exactly what I’ve been: oblivious. For the past hour I’ve been so immersed in a discussion of alien abductions, paranormal phenomena, and UFO hermeneutics with James and Skeeze that I hadn’t noticed what Kayleigh and Francesca had been doing.

“You guys have heard of the Hindu goddess Kali, destroyer of worlds, right?” Francesca asks us as we head toward the table. “Well, meet Kayleigh, destroyer of kitchens.”

“I made beef stew, motherfuckers.” Kayleigh stands and does a little impromptu belly dance as a way of acknowledging her fearsome, kitchen-annihilating powers. The kitchen is indeed a mess: pots and pans dribble and bubble with brown goop on the stove; there’s more brown goop on the ladles and smeary spoons strewn everywhere; and detritus from flour, celery, meat, potatoes, onions, bay leaves, carrots, and heavy cream has been left out on the cutting boards and kitchen counters. Something sure smells good, though.

“Grab some bowls and serve yourselves,” Francesca says, clearing away the marijuana stalks and leaf debris from the redwood table. “Spoons are in the top drawer next to the dishwasher.”

After we all sit down with our bowls of stew, Kayleigh asks us what we’ve been talking about for the past hour while she and Francesca were being so productive.

“Nothing, really. Just guy stuff...” James says, trying to shut her down for some reason.

I can see how annoyed that answer makes Kayleigh, so I try to summarize our conversation for her:

“I was explaining to James and Skeeze why your Uncle Bucky preferred the terms ‘sunsight’ and ‘sunclipse’ over the more misleading terms ‘sunrise’ and ‘sunset’ – and how that got me thinking about the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in relation to paranormal phenomena.”

“The Sapir-*what?*” Francesca asks, looking at me askance.

“The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. It’s the theory that the semantic structure of our language determines our thoughts and behavior. Or as Federico Fellini put it: ‘A different language is a different vision of life.’ For instance, if your language doesn’t have the words for a particular concept, then you probably aren’t going to become aware of that concept in the first place, much less be able to communicate it to another person. And if your language uses misleading terms for a concept – like ‘sunset’ – then you’re more likely to have a permanent misunderstanding of that concept. George Orwell had the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in mind when he was writing *1984*; Newspeak is an example of how a totalitarian government might use language as a means of cultural control, with its slogans like ‘Freedom is slavery’ and so on....”

“So how’s that relate to UFOs an’ shit?” Kayleigh asks, following me.

“Well, to cite just one example, Jacques Vallee pointed out in *The Invisible College* that unidentified flying objects, or UFOs, aren’t necessarily objects and they aren’t always flying. Unlike objects, they often seem to materialize and dematerialize at will. And they zip around in ways that really can’t be called flying: they often float in the air, perfectly still, and then shoot off from a dead stop at speeds

that radars track at thousands of miles an hour; they sometimes even make right angle turns at those speeds, which would generate G-forces so extreme that they'd flatten the insides of any normal pilot. So the term UFO is misleading. And calling them 'flying saucers' is even worse."

"But 'foo fighters'..." says James, "now *there's* a good one."

"Vallee's theory is that we always end up describing paranormal phenomena in terms that reflect the current state of our technology. But it goes the other way, too: the aliens - or whatever they are - seem to show up in vehicles that reflect the times we're living in. In the late-eighteen-hundreds, for instance, they used to get around in dirigibles."

"And in the Bible, Ezekiel described a UFO coming down out of the sky as a chariot," Skeeze fills in. "In fact, there's a whole Jewish tradition based on 'chariot' or *merkabah* mysticism in the Kabbalah. It's considered such dangerous knowledge that rabbinical scholars aren't allowed to study the *merkabah* texts until they're over thirty. One young Jewish whippersnapper supposedly snuck a look at the texts before then and just as their true meaning was being revealed to him he exploded in a fiery burst of spontaneous combustion."

"That's why I expect Crash to go up in flames any day now," James comments wryly.

"He was sure on fire last night," Kayleigh says, licking her lips.

"I won't countenance such smutty talk in mah house..." says James, sounding like an old Confederate general, "unless, of course, it comes from mah wife."

"You wish," says Francesca and we all laugh – albeit a bit uneasily.

"So here's the thing..." I say, getting to my main point after the laughter dies down: "I think we need better words – or better metaphors, at least – to truly understand what's really going on with paranormal phenomena. The UFOs have a kind of dual nature that isn't even hinted at by the term 'unidentified flying object.' I mean, yeah, they have an object-like reality at times: radars can track them, they leave traces of radiation and landing imprints behind sometimes, and they even kill people every now and then. That's been established. But they also have a *psychic* side to them. They seem to interact in strange ways with the consciousness of the observer."

"Okay, now here's the part where Crash really goes nuts," James cuts in. "Are you guys ready for this?"

"Put on your hermeneutical fire suit, you mad bastard," Skeeze says to me. "I love it."

"Crash taught us a new word today..." James explains to Kayleigh and Francesca, "*Hermeneutics*."

"The etymology of the word goes back to the Greek god Hermes," I say, recalling a paragraph from one of my lectures at Esalen. "Hermes relayed messages from the gods to humanity, conducted souls through the underworld, assisted in the creation of poetry and literature, and parceled out dreams and prophetic visions. He was also said to be the inventor of language, along with being a liar, a trickster, and a thief. So he's the ideal representative of *hermeneutics*, a word that traditionally referred to the theory and practice of interpreting sacred texts and divine messages."

“But now it means fuck-all,” James says unhelpfully.

“Its modern meaning has been muddled,” I acknowledge, “after Martin Heidegger had his way with it. Now it just means the study of interpretations in general, which seems a little vague and redundant. But I’d like to see a new hermeneutics of paranormal phenomena – dealing with the interpretation of alien abductions, UFOs, poltergeists, telekinesis, and so on – with a special emphasis on the interpreter’s creative role in the interpretation. Or maybe I should rephrase that and say ‘the observer’s *psychic* role in the creation of the observed paranormal phenomena.’ Because I think that, in a way, we’re at least partly responsible for our own alien abductions. No offense, Skeeze.”

“None taken, dude,” Skeeze assures me.

“You lost me,” says Francesca. “How could Skeeze’ve caused his own abduction by little grey aliens?”

“By dogs in Superman suits, actually,” James corrects her.

“Whatever. I still don’t get it. How the hell did Skeeze get that flying black triangle to swoop down and beam him up? Was he waving a red flag or something?”

“The way I’m thinking, it’s a bit more subtle than that,” I say. “Reality is much stranger than our brains allow us to comprehend. What I mean by that is that our brains act as filters, narrowing our perceptions of ultimate reality – or the Real. It’s kind of like the electromagnetic spectrum: our senses can only pick up a tiny fraction of that spectrum, even though it’s buzzing and burning all around us – and through us – at any given moment. And don’t even get me started on quantum physics, which has already proven that ‘matter’ doesn’t exist as most people understand it and

quantum probability collapses when subjected to the consciousness of an observer. The takeaway is that reality, as we normally perceive it, is almost entirely hidden from us due to our limited sensory capacities. But I think that when we observe paranormal phenomena, we're being allowed to apprehend a little more of it."

"More of the Real," Skeeze clarifies.

"Dude, you sound like an ad for Coca-Cola," says James.

Kayleigh and Francesca start to giggle and sing:

*I'd like to teach the Greys to sing
In perfect harmony
I'd like to buy them all some coke
And keep them company
It's the real thing...*

James decides it's time for another round of beer. He gets up and goes to the refrigerator, returning with a six-pack of Miller Genuine Draft. I guess we've already gone through all the good stuff.

"That Apprehending the Real bullshit sounds great, but it still doesn't explain how Skeeze was responsible for his own alien abduction," Francesca points out.

"Tell 'em about D-Consciousness," Skeeze suggests to me.

"Okay..." I say, after taking a big slug of watery lager. "So, for a long time now, I've had this notion that dreams function as a sort of pre-flight check for the *Bardo* - that liminal state we encounter after death and before our next incarnation where, according to the Tibetans, we experience the clearest perceptions of the Real that we're spiritually capable of. So dreams, for me, are kind of like *Bardo* practice runs experienced by the consciousness of

my subliminal Self – a Self that has already been through multiple incarnations and is just temporarily using my current body and brain as a portal to beam its energy into three-dimensional life on Earth. Again, we’re running into the problem of not having the right words to use here... but let’s stick with the Tibetans and use *Bardo*, even though I’m not sure that everything I’m about to attribute to it is fully implied in that word. Because what I’m about to suggest is that the full-spectrum *Bardo* would be synonymous with the Real. It would actually include the realm that we know as life on Earth, but that would be just one of many alternative realms of existence. In other words, our sensory perceptions of our physical lives in this world would all be happening in just one narrow bandwidth of the *Bardo*, coming to us like one particular radio station broadcasting at a specific frequency.”

“You’re tuned to 90.3, Earth Realm, on your *Bardo* dial,” James booms out in his smooth radio announcer’s voice.

“Right – like Paul Éluard said: ‘There is another world, but it is in this one.’ When we’re dreaming, we’re no longer tuned in to the Earth Realm. Our consciousness is somewhere else in the *Bardo*, acting like a tourist. That’s why I want to propose that dreaming should more properly be called D-Consciousness,” I say, “because it’s a separate and distinct form of consciousness from our waking consciousness – or W-Consciousness. In fact, waking consciousness, or *world*-consciousness, seems to originate from within the cerebrum and dreaming consciousness, or *death*-consciousness, seems to come from within the cerebellum, so the two modes of consciousness have two very different physical filters on them, if you buy into the brain-as-filter theory.”

“And who doesn’t?” That’s James, being facetious again.

“This is getting way too scientific-sounding for me,” Francesca says, squinting at me with one eye as she cocks her bottle of MGD and takes a sip.

“Me too,” Kayleigh chimes in. “I’m just a simple country girl. I still don’t get why Skeeze had to abduct his own sorry ass an’ force himself to chug down all that glow-in-the-dark alien jizz.”

“I was just joking about the alien jism,” Skeeze reminds everyone. “It’s not like I’m bi- or anything....”

“But your consciousness is bi-modal,” I say, “and here’s why it matters: As your consciousness shifts from one mode to the other – from sleeping to waking, for instance – a lot of crossover action necessarily happens in-between. Some of us know those moments as hypnopompic and hypnagogic hallucinations – basically, dreaming while we’re awake. But what if there’s more to it than that? Think about poltergeists, sexy succubus encounters, ghosts, leprechauns, and hell... even alien abductions. Couldn’t they all be products of the dreaming mind’s ability to externalize its contents?”

“So you’re saying Skeeze just *dreamed* he was abducted?” Francesca asks me, confused.

“No. I’m not saying that at all. That’s why I think we need a term like D-Consciousness. Dreaming implies that the experience wasn’t real – that when Skeeze was abducted he must have been asleep during the whole ordeal. It’s an *either-or* situation: either it really happened to him, or it was all in his head. But what I’m talking about is a *both-and* situation. I’m saying that D-Consciousness has the ability to invade our waking reality. What happens then has both

‘mental’ and ‘material’ qualities to it that manifest – in part, or wholly – according to the subliminal psychic intentions of the observer.”

“Bingo!” says Skeeze.

“I’m still not sure I get it,” says Francesca.

“Think of it this way...” I say. “Lucid dreaming is an in-breaking of W-Consciousness into D-Consciousness; your waking mind becomes aware of your dreaming mind and then you can do things within the dream-reality, like will yourself to fly. A hypnopompic hallucination – a dreamlike occurrence within your waking-reality – would be an in-breaking of D-Consciousness into W-Consciousness... and it can do things, too, like manifest a UFO.”

“So a poltergeist, then, is some evil-minded D-Consciousness comin’ in to scare the livin’ daylights out of W-Consciousness, right?”

Kayleigh gets it.

“*Exactly!* It all starts to make sense if you think of the two modes of consciousness as being received and then filtered by the brain, from both local and non-localized sources, rather than originating wholly from within the brain itself. And the two modes can interact because they’re both complementary aspects of the full-spectrum *Bardo* – or the transcendent Real.”

“Well, I guess that explains everything,” says James, setting aside his empty bowl and leaning back from the table with his hands resting across his beer-distended belly. “Skeeze, you’re your own worst alien nightmare. And Crash... shouldn’t you be burnt to a crisp by now?”

“Dude, he skated right around *merkabah* mysticism,” Skeeze says, rising to my defense. “Chill out. I think you

need one of my special Skeezy Margaritas.”

OBE-133: EGREGORE ECONOMICS

Lloyd Marrsden taught us a new word a few hours before we died (and no, it wasn't hermeneutics, although it's related to the topics that Gordon was just discussing). The word was egregore. As Lloyd explained it, "When two minds come together to achieve a common goal, a third and superior mind is created - an egregore."

The Third Mind is an egregore's most basic form - two minds commingling their morphic fields, 'entangled' on a quantum level so that nonlocal transference of information becomes possible via the egregore. "In the beginning," Lloyd elaborated, "an egregore is no more than a kind of crude quantum computer program that helps you to achieve your goal. Such help can arrive in many forms. From within, it might turn up as inspired thoughts. From without, it might appear as useful synchronicities... but when the process continues over a long period of time and more minds are persuaded to add their psychic energy to its agenda, an egregore can grow strong enough and smart enough to survive even the death of its original creators. At that point, the egregore truly has a life of its own."

We asked Lloyd to be more specific and he obliged: "Consider the egregore of the Templars," he said, "energized by the fanatical devotion and bloodshed of thousands of men for nearly 200 years. In 1314, after Pope Clement nullified the Templar Order with a helping hand from King Philip the Fair, the egregore of the Templars

lived on. By then, it had become conscious. It knew how to think – how to get what it wanted. It murdered those who had conspired against it and then it withdrew to the inner dimensions. There, with infinite patience, it waited for centuries until it was contacted by a new order of men prepared to carry out the intentions of its original founders and supply the egregore with the psychic energy it requires to function in our world. What those men gained in return was access to the Templar egregore's vast accumulation of knowledge and power."

The men in that new order called themselves Freemasons, according to Lloyd. He went on to explain how corporations, political parties, religions, and even nations all have their own egregores that are constantly warring for influence over humankind. Lloyd being Lloyd, he did a great job of explaining how egregores could be used to promote evil agendas:

"Some egregores are created in fits of malice or xenophobic hatred, and those egregores exist only to destroy, giving rise to instincts for death and domination in their individual members. The Nazi egregore would be a prime example, of course.... Such an egregore has a vicious, malign strength, and it can infect other egregores like a virus. By imposing its form on its enemies, it thereby becomes its enemies. I believe something like that occurred when the CIA made the grotesque moral error of bringing Nazi war criminals to our shores during Operation Paperclip. The Nazi egregore infected the CIA egregore and eventually overpowered it. The Nazis even had a word for such invisible battles among egregores: Weltanschauungskrieg. It translates as 'world-view warfare.' They may have been the first to name it, but this

type of warfare has been going on for centuries.... After all, the magickal birthing and feeding of egregores was the carefully guarded secret at the core of the ancient mystery cults - a process they called 'The Art of Creating Gods.' And some of mankind's oldest myths refer to a war between those so-called gods, at which point Man became a slave to egregores that he himself had created. We've been obliged to serve them ever since, not only with sweat and tears, but with our blood."

What Lloyd failed to mention was that some egregores can be forces for good in the world. The egregore of the Esalen Institute, for instance, sheltered Gordon with its accumulated Light and Love during the five years that he lived there (while also sating his considerable sex drive with its "'I'm okay, you're okay, let's fuck' ethos," as he described it). Our own Invisible College can be considered an egregore, as well.

We can't, however, fault Lloyd for failing to look on the bright side - not when so many of the Earth's egregores seem to exist solely for the benefit of the Archons and their Dark Brotherhood. What Lloyd had to say about corporations was especially pertinent in that regard:

"Let's think for a moment about how the egregores of corporations operate, since the Reagan administration seems so determined to hand our country over to them. It's not much of an exaggeration to say that corporations are immortal soulless entities that take as much as they can and give nothing in return. Their primary goal is to keep increasing productivity and earnings in an all-devouring, endless cycle. Corporate egregores exploit their workers, pollute the environment, and turn vast quantities of the world's irreplaceable natural resources into disposable

junk products, all just to show a quarterly profit. They steal from the poor and give to the rich, creating enormous concentrations of wealth in the hands of just a few thousand elitist assholes. If Reagan and Bush get their way and all that money and power isn't redistributed - via a system of fair taxes and the checks and balances built into our Constitution - then America's liberal, democratic society will soon be looking a lot more like a corporate-sponsored fascist police state. And that will be because, quite simply, the egregores of unchecked capitalism tend to penalize those who would better the lot of humanity, while at the same time rewarding the relatively few unbridled sociopaths who take advantage of anyone and anything that they can."

Soon after we crossed over to the Other Side, we learned a few things about egregores that Lloyd hadn't told us. The biggest revelation was this: Egregores act as banks between worlds, transdimensionally-transferring Loosh from one realm to the next.

In other words, whatever you contribute to an egregore, you're later entitled to withdraw (minus certain egregore-maintaining service fees and handling charges, of course...). Since it's Loosh on deposit that we're talking about here - psychic energy in its various permutations, already possessing all the properties of astral matter - an egregore can accumulate and transfer vast amounts of it from Earth's physical realm to the Other Side's astral realms as easily as a Swiss bank can accept a million dollars worth of cash deposits in Lucerne and then electronically transfer that same amount in a matter of seconds to the brokerage account of a shell company in the Cayman Islands.

After investing your Loosh in an egregore, you'll often have the option of taking your payments in the form of financial compensation on Earth. That's actually how most corporations are set up to work, although you should know that in those situations the deal is often heavily skewed in the corporate egregore's favor. The banking metaphor starts to break down a bit here, but it's still useful. Taking money from an egregore is like getting a loan from a bank, then making payments on the interest and principal. Most loans eventually get paid off for a total amount far in excess of the original loan value. The bank also counts on a certain small percentage of its loans to go into default; in fact, when it's to the bank's advantage, it will sometimes force loans into default. In much the same way, corporate egregores accumulate excessive amounts of Loosh from their paid employees (especially their low-wage employees), while knowing that a certain percentage of those employees will - through sometimes nefarious means - lose their claim to their own Loosh on the Other Side.

The best way to rob a bank is to own one. A lot of Archons "own" egregores for similar reasons.

Need we say more?

THE LOVE CIGARS

“Guys can be such assholes!”

That’s Kayleigh ranting at me as we tromp along from James and Francesca’s house back to my place at one o’clock in the morning. We’re both too fucked up to drive. Anyway, it’s a beautiful night and the walk is mostly downhill. Towering, shadowy pines surround us, outlining a crack in the world through which the universe hangs suspended in all its milky glittering vastness. This could have been an occasion for romance, but Kayleigh is in an incredibly foul mood. I can’t really blame her. James slipped into his Shady Jim persona again and the results were ugly for everyone involved.

“How can you even be friends with someone like that?” Kayleigh asks me.

I’m not even going to *attempt* to answer that.

“James is a reptile,” I concede. “He never should’ve said those things about Francesca – but she was kind of pushing his buttons, in case you didn’t notice.”

“I can’t believe you’d try an’ take his side!” Kayleigh shrills. She picks up her pace, deliberately putting her back to me. Soon she’s several yards ahead of me on the inky black asphalt.

Fucking James... I think in my drunken solipsism, thanks to him, I probably won’t get laid tonight.

I'm reminded, yet again, that relationships are difficult and I'm fundamentally alone in a harsh world.

Or as James would put it: "People, generally, suck."



Here's what happened:

It started with a drinking game while James and Skeeze and I were watching *The Meier Chronicles*. Every time someone said the word "Pleiadians" we had to shout, "¡Beam me up, space *mamacitas!*" and take a slug of Skeeze's Skeezy Margaritas (Cazadores tequila, pulque, frozen mangoes, a lewd splash of Bailey's Irish Cream, and ice mixed in a blender until smooth and then poured into beer steins rimmed with coarse sea salt and garnished with a slice of lime). By the time the documentary was over, all three of us were smashed.

Skeeze had another video for us to watch - something about Betty and Barney Hill, an interracial couple known as the first modern UFO abductees - but before we got started with that, James asked me if I wanted to see the rest of his house. Since I hadn't gotten the full tour during my last visit (due to his abrupt swan dive off the balcony), I said sure, that'd be great, and we headed upstairs, leaving Francesca and Kayleigh to their marijuana bud ministrations.

The décor of James and Francesca's master bedroom resembled a *fin de siècle* French pimp's lair. There was a stone fireplace with crossed blunderbusses mounted over the mantle. The walls were paneled in fine, dark mahogany, as was the coffered ceiling. Crimson velvet curtains, transparent drapes, and golden braided silk cords softened the hard edges of the leaded glass windows. Twin Art

Nouveau dressers and a matching armoire displayed elaborate patterns of marquetry. And at the center of it all was a king-sized waterbed with a leopard fur bedspread and an expensive-looking headboard sporting carved cherubim.

I had to ask: "Did real leopards have to die for that duvet cover?"

"Yup," James gloated, "it's made from genuine Tibetan Snow Leopard skins. Lloyd had it imported for me as a Christmas gift."

"The fairy-fucking-godfather strikes again."

"Nice, huh?"

"I'll say," said Skeeze. "The fur must tickle your nuts in just the right way while you're boning your lady there."

"It does," James admitted, made earnest (and somewhat dim-witted) by all the booze. "I know the headboard looks a little girly with those bare-assed baby angels on it, but that's Francesca's. Her grandma gave it to her. It's supposed to be worth a lot of money."

"Women..." Skeeze said with a rueful shake of his head. "What can you do?"

"Like David Mamet said: 'If they didn't have pussies, there'd be a bounty on 'em.' Which reminds me..." James said, turning my way, "I kind of owe you an apology, Crash. I know I've been a shitty friend to you lately - bailing out on the newspaper and giving you the cold shoulder and all - but that's only because I thought you were fucking my wife."

"What?" I pretended to be thunderstruck, but at the same time I felt an undertow of guilt because - just like our 39th

U.S. President, Jimmy Carter – I knew I had lusted in my heart.

“Well, she’s definitely been fucking *somebody*,” James said. “And you were the most likely candidate, since it started right around when you moved to town.”

“What started?”

“Francesca, acting weird. Making up all kinds of excuses to stay out late. And then, when she got home, she smelled different – kind of sweaty, but it wasn’t like girl sweat. It smelled more like another guy had been sweating on top of her.”

Skeeze’s hand shot up and waved as if he wanted to be called on by a nearsighted schoolmarm. “Dude, where’s the bathroom?” he said through a mouthful of spit. “I think I’m gonna hurl.”

“In there.” James pointed to a polished mahogany door on the far side of the room. Skeeze lurched toward it and pushed the door open, then fell to his knees in front of a gleaming white toilet with a mahogany seat on brass hinges, which he banged out of the way just before he stuck his head in the bowl and commenced puking.

“I probably shouldn’t be saying this,” James continued with me, seemingly unfazed by the sound of Skeeze’s retching, “but lately, when we’re doin’ it, she just doesn’t feel right... if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t have a clue, actually.”

“It’s like she’s loose! Like somebody else has been inside her, stretching her pussy out and making it all sloppy.”

“Yeah, that might’ve been a little too much information there, James.”

He was swaying and walleyed, doing jerky little dance steps to stay upright. "Right, well, like I said... at first I thought it was you - which really pissed me off. I was thinking I might even have to kill you. But then I found out you'd hooked up with Kayleigh last night, which means it *couldn't've* been you - because Francesca fucked some other guy last night for sure. Don't ask me how I know, but I know.... So I was wrong about you, Crash. I hope you can forgive me for being such a suspicious slinking dog and plotting to murder your skinny ass."

"No problem, James," I said, a bit heavy on the sarcasm.

"If it makes any difference, I was planning to do it with a gun to the back of your head, like George did to Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*. It wouldn't have hurt much that way."

"Gee, thanks."

"I'm sorry. I'm just a jealous guy... what can I say?"

"I guess if it'd happened to me, I'd be jealous too," I said, thinking it best not to remind James that he'd stolen Francesca from me in the first place. I also thought it unwise to joke that I might have spent the night with both Kayleigh *and* Francesca in a mind-blowing *ménage à trois*.

"Still friends?"

"Sure. At least now I know why you were acting like such a dick."

We shook hands as Skeeze came out of the bathroom brushing flecks of vomit from his beard.

"Man, I just barfed up a rainbow in there," Skeeze marveled. "I feel so healthy now! I think I'm ready for more margaritas. How 'bout you guys?"

At that moment the phone rang. There was a wireless handset on the nightstand next to the waterbed. James checked the caller I.D. and said, "That's my mom. I gotta take this. I'll meet you guys downstairs."

After Skeeze and I went back downstairs and started watching the Betty and Barney Hill documentary, I noticed that I could overhear snatches of conversation from Kayleigh and Francesca across the room as they continued their work at the redwood table. They both sounded incredibly high:

"...it's like high school, only it lasts longer," Kayleigh was saying. "It's so intense!"

"I miss that," Francesca murmured. "Last night James came in, like, three strokes - and then he jumped right off me and went in the bathroom to throw up."

"Oh gross!" Kayleigh laughed. "So you shoppin' around?"

"For another man? No. But I've been looking at rentals after work in the evenings. I'm thinking of getting my own place."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's the drinking. It's gotten to the point where I'm afraid to be alone with him." Francesca also said something about James being a tightwad, but I couldn't hear the rest.

The next time I tuned in - as I was walking toward the kitchen to get a margarita refill - Kayleigh was going off an extended monologue:

"...I ain't even seen the bitch in, like, five years now, but back then I couldn't admit she was all messed up, so I blamed my dad. He's a great guy - took real good care o' me - but I just gave him holy hell after my mom run off. Like, this one night, I came home super-late after some

hard partyin' with my high school pals. I didn't call or nothin', so the ol' dude was pissed. He started readin' me the riot act and I jus' stomped up the stairs to my room an' slammed the door in his face. There weren't no use in him talkin' to me, anyway - I was 'bout ready to pass out. So I jus' flopped down on the bed, with him yellin' at me from the other side o' the door, and then the whole room started spinnin' and well... you know. Shit happens. I think I puked in my panties. Next thing I know, my dad's in there shakin' me awake, and there're all these Maxipads tossed around everywhere, an' tampon strings hangin' in his hair, and he's sayin', 'Kayleigh, wake up! There's a ghost in your room. I saw it!' And I'm goin' like, 'What the - ?'"

"What the - ?" Francesca echoed.

"You'll like this part, Gordon," Kayleigh said, noticing me over by the refrigerator. "So come sit your butt down."

"This is your dad, the English professor, you're talking about?" I asked her, sitting.

"Yeah. You could call him up an' he'd tell you the exact same story. Anyway, what happened was, my dad heard somethin' crashin' around in my room. Whatever it was, it was bangin' against the walls somethin' fierce, so he jimmied the lock and busted in on me. When he got in there, he said I was jus' passed out on the bed, snorin' away - but all this freaky shit was happenin' all around me. Like, my dresser was slammin' against the wall, all by itself, an' all the clothes hangers in my closet was shakin' an' rattlin' around, an' there was this goddam tornado o' tampons spinnin' around, flingin' shit everywhere. It freaked my dad right the fuck out. He said it was jus' like the prom scene in that Stephen King movie, *Carrie*, only without the bucket o' pig blood."

“So you’re a poltergeist girl!” I said to Kayleigh.

“Right! That’s what we figgered. My dad said I musta been so mad at him that my unconscious mind, or whatever, went on a fuckin’ rampage. That’s why all that stuff you said about D-Consciousness and W-Consciousness started makin’ sense to me. I been a poltergeist myself.”

“That must’ve been so scary for you,” Francesca said, taking Kayleigh’s hand.

“It was a definite game changer,” Kayleigh said. “Right after that, I decided to become a witch.”

“So the plan, I take it, was to be able to do poltergeist tricks at will.”

“Damn straight,” she said to me.

“How’s that been working out for you?”

Kayleigh blew out a long sigh. “It’s a lot more complicated than I thought it’d be.”

“D-Consciousness doesn’t like taking orders,” I pointed out to her. “It probably regards W-Consciousness as an inferior mode of being.”

“Still, I can do some shit with it every now an’ then. It’s just unpredictable.”

“I’ll say....” I was thinking of my own not always successful demonstrations of my psychic abilities at Esalen.

James chose that moment to come down the spiral staircase.

“Hey, where’ve you been?” Francesca asked him, projecting a light-hearted mood.

“My mom called,” said James, frowning. “God, it was depressing. She’s so disappointed in me.”

“Why?” Francesca asked him, still feigning perkiness. “Has she slept with you, too?”

Kayleigh tried to stifle a laugh, but failed. James glared at her, then unleashed on his wife:

“Have I told you what a ball-busting bitch you are lately?”

“Oh, I hear that plenty, Mister Sensitive.”

“James - ”

“Stay out of it, Crash.”

“You’re so ugly when you get drunk.”

“And you’re a two-timing slut. I’m so sick of listening to you try to justify your existence with all that stupid witch talk while you run around behind my back sucking other guys’ dicks.”

“I do not!”

“I saw dried sperm in your hair last night!”

“What?” Francesca seemed genuinely bewildered.

“Maybe it was tartar sauce,” I suggested.

“I said, ‘STAY OUT OF IT, CRASH!’”

“You’re *such* a raging asshole, but I’ve always been faithful to you,” Francesca said to James in a cold fury. “Now I wish I hadn’t.” Her eyes glistened with held-back tears.

“You were never faithful. You’re always flashing those lizard pouch tits of yours at any guy who comes by the flower stand. You probably sucked off half of ‘em for the price of a dozen roses.”

“How can you be so hateful?” Francesca asked him. His words were like acid hurled in her face. Her cold fury

melted away, replaced by an inconsolable sadness. She bowed her head and started to weep.

“Go ahead: cry your fake crocodile tears. Make everybody feel sorry for you. And then you can just slither off on your cum-drenched cunt and go ruin someone else’s life.”

“Fuck you, James.” Francesca got up from the table with tears streaming down her cheeks. “I loved you once, but you’ve gotten so vicious and paranoid that I can’t stand being around you anymore. So fuck you. I’m leaving.”

She ran up the spiral staircase and out the front door. Moments later, we heard the angry sound of her plum-colored Porsche starting up in the driveway and then roaring off into the night.

James just stood there staring at the staircase, breathing hard, with his hands held at his sides, clenched into fists. Then he turned to Kayleigh and me, still huddled at the redwood table, and said:

“Party’s over, kids.”



When our long walk finally ends at the bottom of the stairs leading up to my house, Kayleigh deigns to speak to me again:

“I didn’t like how you spent the whole night ignorin’ me the way you did. That was a shitty thing to do.”

“W-wait... what?” I stammer. “You and Francesca had your work to do, getting Skeeze’s dope ready for sale, and I had my research to do for the UFO article. What’s the big deal?”

I start up the stairs. Kayleigh stamps up the steps behind me, looking fierce in the moonlight. "Y'all coulda sat and talked with us sometimes. Y'all coulda helped!"

"But I don't know anything about trimming marijuana buds! Besides," I said, trying to lighten the mood, "isn't that stuff supposed to be illegal?"

"Oh, so now you didn't wanna expose your law-abidin' self to our criminal enterprise. Is that it?"

"I just had my own things to do."

"So that's the way it's gonna be with us? You do your things and I do mine?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Plenty! We're supposed to do things together, as a couple!"

"So... what? From now on I'm just supposed to let you dictate what I think and say and do?"

"I ain't sayin' that!"

"Well, what are you saying, Kayleigh? Because I'm starting to get annoyed with this whole controlling 'I own you' attitude of yours."

"You're annoyed? I'm pissed off as hell! How dare you try to pin that bullshit on me!"

"You didn't ask me if you could trim buds with Francesca tonight, but I'm supposed to ask you if I can watch a movie with James and Skeeze? I sense a double-standard here."

"*Ooohhf!*" Kayleigh practically grunts. "You make me so fuckin' mad! You're just twistin' my words!"

"Then explain what you meant! I'll shut up. You can take your time."

I reach for my keys as I step onto the landing that extends from my front door. Kayleigh is still a few steps below, looking as if she wants to kill me. I'm feeling winded from the climb, so I lean against the door to catch my breath. Spookily, it swings open as if I'd forgotten to lock it. From within the darkened doorway, a ghostly fireball blooms right in front of me. I jump back, more astonished than frightened. The fireball flares for a brief moment - heatless but writhing and spattering, like a rattlesnake nest frying in ectoplasmic bacon fat - and then it fades away.

"God! Did you see that?"

I turn to Kayleigh for confirmation and find her standing a few steps down from the landing with her arms folded across her breasts. Blue and violet phosphene after-images are sparking in my vision, but I can make out a grim, tight-lipped smile on her face. Her intentions toward me no longer seem quite so murderous.

"*Now you gonna believe me when I say I'm a witch?*" my stoner witch girlfriend asks me.

I can't help but grin back at her as she continues:

"All I meant to say earlier was that we should join forces." Kayleigh sounds like she's speaking to a tantrum-throwing child. That would be me, of course. "I bet we could do some amazin' things together, if you wasn't so fuck-all fierce about keepin' your independence."



That night, I made love to Kayleigh very tenderly. She seemed volatile and I didn't want to provoke her into calling down another otherworldly fireball on my ass. I worried

that my testicles might end up in another dimension. It was becoming obvious to me that Kayleigh's strange talents had their basis in some dangerous neuroses and an occult agenda.

Just as obviously, I had similar issues of my own to work out.

We ended up joining forces, as she'd suggested. The following day at the flower stand Kayleigh offered Francesca a sublet on her two-room bungalow tucked away in the woods up on Santa Rosa Creek Road. The bungalow was small, but Kayleigh had made it into a cozy home filled with colorful braided rag rugs, stained glass lamps, and old Mission style furniture. Francesca found the idea of the sublet appealing after having spent the previous night trying to sleep in her Porsche parked down by the beach. When she asked where Kayleigh would be staying in the meantime, Kayleigh blithely replied, "I'm sure Crash won't mind if I move in with him for a while."

She was right: I didn't mind... although I thought it was a bit presumptuous of her to just invite herself to live with me like that. I could have said no to her, but I didn't. On some level I knew I was asking for trouble, but it was trouble that came wrapped in a bewitching blonde package - and I welcomed it.



Living with Kayleigh proves to be inspiring. In just a few short days, I shape my notes and research into a semi-coherent newspaper article. On Tuesday, I go back to the Cambria Library for some additional facts and conduct an impromptu interview with Lee Ann the Librarian, whose

salami-breath, I find, is far less pungent before lunch. On Wednesday, after a final polish, I triumphantly head into the *Cambria Insurrectionist* to submit my UFO article's double-spaced pages to Nora's editorial scrutiny.

When Nora calls me back into her office, I find her with the pages fanned out over her desk. Her head is bowed over them, her face hidden beneath her silvery bangs. I have to lean sideways to check her mood. She doesn't seem entirely pleased.

"Well, Gordon..." she begins with that plummy Boston Brahmin accent of hers, "I think you have something here, but precisely what it is, I'm not sure. For the sake of clarity, I think we need to extract the cattle mutilation story from the main body of the article and run it as two separate pieces: a short news item about Phil DeSoto and his mysteriously slaughtered cows that will appear beneath the fold on the front page - which I'll write, since we're running short of time - and then a second, interview-style sidebar to your main UFO article that will allow Skeeze tell his quite fantastical abduction tale in his own words."

"That makes sense to me," I say, knowing the article was too long in the first place.

"I like your humorous recounting of the other UFO events," Nora continues, "but the metaphysical speculations toward the end will have to go. They're not appropriate for our newspaper audience. I mean seriously, Gordon, do you really think the average reader with a shoddy high school education is going to follow your forays into 'D-Consciousness' and... what did you call it?" She looks down at the pages of what is now, definitively, only my first draft. "Oh, yes, here it is: 'W-Consciousness' and its place within

‘the full-spectrum *Bardo*.’” She makes a mildly disdainful farting noise through her withered lips.

“Okay,” I shrug, “so newspaper readers can’t read. You’re the big Editor-in-Chief... you should know. But at least *you* understand what I was getting at, don’t you?”

“If I ever *do* claim to understand it, I hope you’ll commit me to a psychiatric treatment facility immediately.”

I start to laugh, even though her words sting. “Okay, so to hell with the metaphysics,” I say.

“And good riddance. Now let’s get back to work. Tonight’s our paste-up deadline, as you well know, and I’d like to run the entire abomination in this week’s issue. Halloween’s coming up and we’re somewhat short on real news.”



I take a seat in the production paste-up room to rewrite my article on one of the *Insurrectionist*’s underpowered Apple computers. Nora’s daughter, Calliope, is in there with me, doing ad layouts with the radio on. The radio happens to be tuned to KOTR and James happens to be on the air, in the final stretch of his morning drive-time show. He sounds like he’s trying to get himself fired – or at the very least, fined by the FCC. As “Suspicious Minds” by the Fine Young Cannibals fades out, he breaks in with his suave DJ’s voice to say:

“You’re tuned to KOTR, the station that won’t cum in your mouth.”

I burst out laughing while Calliope says, scowling, “Oh James, you’re so foul!”

"I think he's working out some resentment toward his wife there," I inform Calliope. "Francesca left him a few days ago after he accused her of performing unauthorized blowjobs at the flower stand."

"Good for her! That fuckwit deserves to be dumped."

After a commercial break, James returns with more to say:

"Okay, so I know how you're all losing sleep out there wondering what's up with Michael Jackson and that shiny glove. I mean, like, why only one? And why won't he ever take it off? Is he hiding something? Well, you can rest easy now, because your hero, A.C. Nightshade, has uncovered the secret. Are you ready for this?" We can hear James moving closer to his studio mic as he stage-whispers: "Michael Jackson's glove is fulla Vaseline."

"Oh no..." Calliope groans.

"That's right!" James crows. "Vaseline! Michael Jackson wants to keep that one hand extra soft and silky. Wanna know why? Because he uses it to masturbate his chimp!"

Calliope looks gravely offended for a moment, but then she breaks into a helpless grin as James cues up a tape of rhesus monkeys screaming and shouts in a fey, dead-on impersonation of Michael Jackson:

"Get down, Bubbles! Down you big-weenied brute! *Ohhw!*"

After that, the radio resounds with the unmistakable intro to Jackson's "Beat It."

"How does he come up with all that perverted stuff, day after day?" Calliope wonders aloud.

"Maybe he's projecting his own thoughts onto Michael Jackson," I suggest to her.

"You mean, like, maybe James started spanking his own monkey after Francesca ditched him?"

"Exactly."

Calliope frowns at the radio. "It makes sense. So basically, as long as he's a DJ, James can blab to the whole town about any pervy idea that pops into his head."

"Consider it a form of therapy. Maybe by airing his neurotic thoughts in public, he'll get over them quicker."

"Well, if that's what's happening, he must be one sick puppy."

"I can't argue with you there, Calliope."

It occurs to me then that *I* might be the one who's projecting. After all, I'm only a few days away from inflicting my UFO article on an unsuspecting populace. Am I on the verge of embarrassing myself by airing my neurotic thoughts in public?

Then again, what was it that Nora said? "Never fear making an ass of yourself. Journalists must be absolutely shameless in their pursuit of absolute truth."

Right. I turn back to the computer and get to work.



ALIENS ABDUCTED MY EASTER BUNNY

On Easter morning, 1973, I hitched up my fuzzy blue pajama bottoms and skulked from my bedroom before dawn to hunt for Easter

eggs. I was six and a rebel. I padded through the silent house, feeling like a thief, and peeked through the curtains hiding a sliding glass door that opened onto our backyard patio. It was still dark outside.

There was no sign of my faithful basset hound, Sam, whose sniffing talents I had hoped to employ in my search. But an odd and wondrous thing was happening out there: shimmering fairy lights were shooting out of Sam's doghouse. They bobbed in the air above the patio, glowing pink, orange, pale green, and blue. The lights soon assumed the shape of a cartoon rabbit - something like Bugs Bunny, but without a face. The rabbit hopped toward me, giving me a feeling that it wanted to say hello. My mother's rhododendron bush caught the side of its head and sent it spinning - now a frog, now a lion, now a coyote - then it regained its shape as a rabbit and stood on the other side of the glass, looking me up and down.

I decided to let it in.

A brilliant flash exploded in my face as I fumbled with the lock. I was hurled to the floor. Then I was pummeled by a swarm of colored lights that seemed to possess both teeth and claws. I quickly lost consciousness.

Later, I woke up with the sickening conviction that I'd just had my ass kicked by the Easter Bunny.

* * *

My parents no doubt listened to my wild Easter Bunny tale with the same calm concern they showed when I woke up screaming about monsters in my closet. They probably assured me that all was right in the world and then they went off to consult Dr. Spock to see if there was anything further to be done about my misconceptions.

Years later, I started thinking of my Easter Bunny encounter as a clever trick perpetrated by my father, who owned a hardware store and thus had access to all manner of electronics and colored spotlights. I was too old to believe in the Easter Bunny, but still young enough to attribute infinite wisdom to my old man.

Still later, when my friends in college tried to persuade me to take certain drugs of a hallucinogenic nature, I often told the story as a polite way of refusing their offers ("I don't need to see God; I've seen the Easter Bunny...").

That was how the story stood until a few weeks ago, when a friend persuaded me to read Whitley Strieber's supposedly true account of his adventures with alien life forms, *Communion*. And now I'm thinking, *Maybe that Easter Bunny was a UFO and I've been abducted by aliens - just like Whitley.*

And you're thinking, *Maybe he took those hallucinogens in college after all....*

Let's try to keep an open mind here, shall we? Aliens are no stranger (and far more often glimpsed) than the quarks some of our leading quantum physicists are hunting down, or the black pygmies thought by many to reside in the forests of Big Sur. The really repugnant thing about aliens – let's admit it – is that we loathe to think there might be intelligent life in the universe that's more intelligent than we are. We don't want to come into contact with a life form that communicates via the telepathy of angels and be caught having Dan Quayle as our Vice-President.

Strieber's aliens are intelligent, true, but they're also rude. The little blue ones in overalls sneak up and grab you while you're still in bed. Then the bug-eyed skinny ones like you saw in Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* steal your clothes and work you over with a rectal probe. It's all so terrifying that your brain shuts down and represses the whole episode, leaving you with a flimsy screen memory. (After one of his abduction episodes, Strieber told his wife he'd been visited by a barn owl; maybe owls aren't what they seem....)



And here's something that really makes you think: Most people who claim to have been abducted by aliens find they were first abducted when they were very young. For instance, Strieber has a memory of throwing up on a train ride when he was a boy of twelve, and later - through the magic of hypnosis - he learned that while he was on that train, aliens nabbed him and injected him with something that made him sick.

While reading that passage I immediately thought, *Hey, I threw up in a train when I was a kid, too!*

And, of course, I've seen the Easter Bunny....

A show of hands now, please: How many of you have ever been train-sick? How many of you have been visited by the Easter Bunny? How many of you have seen a UFO? How many of you - be honest - have been abducted by aliens (rectal probes optional)?

I set out to interview some of Cambria's UFO believers. The stories that follow are true - or so everyone claimed. The names have been changed just for the hell of it.

* * *

Deep in the Los Padres Forest, far from all the city lights, the Red Wind Foundation set aside 200 acres for the perpetuation of Native American culture. Myrna Running Beaver, a Jewish native of New York, came to live and

work on the Red Wind land through a chain of circumstances both strange and spiritually meaningful. From 1973 to 1975, she and many other inhabitants at Red Wind saw UFOs virtually every night. Bright lights traversed the dome of the sky in seconds, made turns at 90-degree angles, and generally behaved in ways that satellites and man-made aircraft do not.

The chief skeptic at Red Wind was an old Chumash Indian named Uncle Stan. He refused to believe the stories of Myrna and the others. It didn't matter to him that the term UFO meant Unidentified Flying Object and nothing more, as Myrna explained. Uncle Stan was beyond such idiocies.

Then one night Uncle Stan's wife woke him up to tell him that their house was full of red light. And yes, Uncle Stan had to admit, she was right. Outside the window there was a rather flat spaceship emitting a fiery red beam without a sound. Odd. The whole thing disappeared all at once and Uncle Stan and his wife stayed up all night talking about it.

In the morning, Uncle Stan conceded to Myrna that there might be something to that UFO business, after all.

** * **

Myrna didn't take her interview lightly. After she finished telling me about her experiences at Red Wind, she insisted on calling up someone who had been there with her. The person on the

phone confirmed that everything Myrna had told me was true. It could hardly have been a set-up, since I had prepared for my interview by simply walking into the bar at The Sow's Ear and saying, "So Myrna... seen any UFOs lately?"

Myrna also claimed she'd had vivid dreams of walking into a field at Red Wind to meet the aliens. She told them she came in peace and then realized it was unnecessary to speak because they could read her thoughts and communicate with her telepathically. They said they were friendly.

And one more thing: According to Myrna and the person who vouched for her on the phone, Chumash folklore tells of a messenger from the North Star called Tobet who arrived on Earth to deliver instructions to the medicine men. Those instructions are secret, but Myrna thinks they must have something to do with the Chumash goal of living a life of balance and harmony. "We are caretakers of Paradise," say the Chumash. "Earth is the Mother."

* * *

Prior to all the drugs, kinky sex, and weird fame that came to him as the bass player for the psychedelic rock band, Titanium Daisy, Zoyd Roland was a seventeen-year-old virgin, like most of us. In 1968, enrolled as a freshman at the University of Akron, he was supposed to

be joining his astronomy class in the park to look through a large telescope.

Instead, Zoyd had driven a mile further to another part of the park to make out with a girl. It was a starlit autumn night, about eight o'clock, and he and his girl, Rikki, were just topping the ridge of a hill used for sled runs in the winter when Zoyd's whole body began to tingle. Everything in sight was suddenly glowing a weird orange color. Rikki grabbed him, screaming, "What is that? What is it?!"

A bright orange sphere loomed above them, as big as a four-story house. It floated 50 or 60 feet above the trees in a sky that had previously been pitch-dark. Zoyd completely freaked out. He stood there looking at the sphere - it seemed to be getting lower - and then, BOOM? WHOOMPH? It was gone.

Zoyd and Rikki got back in their car and raced the mile back to where the astronomy class was being held, sure their classmates must have seen the sphere, too.

When they got there, half of the class had already left; the others claimed to have seen nothing. Zoyd asked where everyone had gone. He was told the class was over - it was almost twelve o'clock. He couldn't believe it. He asked to see someone's watch. He and Rikki were sure they had seen the UFO no later than half past eight.

* * *

Zoyd is now a professional short-order cook who divides his time between Cambria and Laguna Beach. He and Skeeze (see sidebar) have taken it upon themselves to educate me about some of the more famous cases of UFO contact.

Betty and Barney Hill, for example, were abducted in New Hampshire back around 1961. The aliens stuck a probe in Betty's belly and told her she was pregnant - this, long before amniocentesis techniques had been developed. They also showed her a map of where they came from, which Betty later recreated for the authorities. No such arrangement of stars existed, they said. They were wrong. When computer-generated star maps were developed, Betty's map was shown to be a perfectly drawn representation of the Pleiades star system, looking from their vantage point TOWARD the Earth.

All poor Barney got was a triangular rash on his stomach that never cleared up. It eventually killed him.

Those Pleiadians really get around. The Meier family in Switzerland has been taking pictures of them for years now. I sat down with Skeeze one night and watched a documentary called *The Meier Chronicles* that explained it all to us. The head of the household, Buddy Meier, has sort of a working relationship with the

Pleiadians. They tell him when and where to go with his camera, he sets up (this can take a while, since he only has one arm), and then the aliens do a fly by in their saucer-shaped aircraft.

The videotape is fairly convincing, as homemade videotapes of aliens go. Buddy even has a photo of one of the aliens. They look just like us, except their hairdos are thirty years out of fashion and their earlobes are longer than ours.

"Whoa... the Buddha had long earlobes," I said to Skeeze.

"It's something to think about," Skeeze replied in that conspiratorial tone of his.

Zoyd informs me that the Pleiadians now have their own cable television network. Sexpots from outer space with beehive bouffants and clinging rhinestone-studded gowns are getting up on Art Deco podiums and acting like TV evangelists - or game show hosts. The aliens learn quickly.

They also take out full-page ads in New Age magazines. One such ad in the October 1988 issue of *Magical Blend* reads: "Channeled Extraterrestrial Communion Events featuring Savizar and Silarra and their delightful and wise channeled E.T. buddies...."

Anything to make a buck.

* * *

Two years ago, Hank and Lawanda Emerson were caretakers of a ranch way up on San Simeon Creek Road. Hank was fond of taking long walks on the ranch and ruminating. The topic might be nuclear disarmament, the rise of illiteracy in America, the bills in yesterday's mail - it didn't matter, really. It was the ruminating that was important. So important that Hank nearly missed the strange metallic sphere hanging in the sky as he crested a hill.

But no, there it was... damndest thing he'd ever seen: A genuine UFO, without a doubt. Hank's heart thundered at the incredible sight. The UFO regarded him in a somewhat calmer manner. Then it flew off at an amazing rate of speed and Hank went home to tell Lawanda.

As is still the case with all lurid gossip and weird events, the news soon reached the Cambria Library. From there it passed into the community at large. Cambrians - first a few, then many - packed picnic lunches, drove up San Simeon Creek Road, picked a nice spot on top of a hill or beneath the shade of an old oak, and sat down to wait for the aliens to arrive. Most were disappointed, but a few actually did get a glimpse of the strange hovering spheres - they'll swear it even to this day.

According to library lore, two years before the San Simeon Creek sightings, the spheres were seen out on Highway 46. They're due back any time now.

* * *

Gives one hope, doesn't it?

Many of us want to believe in aliens, for whatever reasons. Some think mankind has wreaked such havoc with the earth's environment that we're close to the point of no return. Aliens represent a quick fix. They could blow the minds of a few CEOs from the major industrial polluters, patch up the hole in the ozone layer, and maybe do a few TV spots ("Don't use hairspray cans and Styrofoam, humans, or we'll reverse the earth's gravity and float you all out to space.") It's the alien as Mr. Fix-It.

Others are looking for a new god, or at least an entertaining substitute for the Praise The Lord Club (watch for those Pleiadians, coming soon to a cable TV station near you). It's the alien as Higher Power - which puts us in the role of servants, absolved of any responsibility for our own lives.

It's funny how the aliens seem to conform to any given person's expectations. Myrna, so full of wonder and Indian lore, related her UFO sightings as a poetic experience. Zoyd and Skeeze - products of the psychedelic sixties and the paranoia created by the Manson murders and Watergate - had the more frightening vision. They're both convinced there's some sort of alien conspiracy going on. ("Do you think

the aliens introduced the AIDS virus?" Skeeze asked me one day.)

Leave it to the Cambrians, neighbors of Hearst Castle, to turn UFOs into a tourist attraction.

What's going on here? Has the universal unconscious sprung a leak? Could geophysical shifts be creating magnetic waves that affect our temporal lobes in ways that make us hallucinate our personal visions of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*? Are the aliens empaths that reflect our deepest longings and hidden fears? Are they midwives to a higher form of consciousness in the human species? Do they exist at all?

My Editor-in-Chief doesn't think it's my place to answer that last question. All I can do is leave you with a quote from Umberto Eco's latest novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*:

"I have come to believe that the whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth."

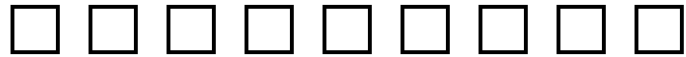


That's how the article ran in the October 28th, 1988 issue of the *Cambria Insurrectionist*. The public response to it was mixed, to put it mildly. I was openly mocked as a UFO nut in some of Cambria's finer dining and drinking establishments. But I was also praised for having an open

mind by some of the fuzzier New Age types around town: the yoga practitioners, aromatherapists, Tarot card readers, and newly converted Buddhists (who sometimes referred to themselves as Newddists in-between their chants of “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo”). I had been prepared for either response, so neither the praise nor the mockery threw me off balance.

What caught me unprepared was the deluge of mail sent my way, care of the newspaper’s address. It seemed to come from every stratum of society and there was more of it than I ever would have imagined. Some of it I found weirdly threatening. For instance, someone anonymously sent me a tape recording from the most recent conference of the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) with a mean little note rubber-banded around the cassette that read: “You asked for this. Now you’re in for it, fucker” – or words to that effect. It struck me as very grim. A local police officer sent me copies of police reports that he and his fellow officers had filed about seeing burning cigar-shaped objects in the sky. (I was appalled by the spelling and grammar in those reports, but they also made me realize that police officers are just as human and baffled by strange events as the rest of us.) A hick businessman from Bakersfield, who’d made a fortune inventing air mattresses for long-haul truckers, wanted to make me his chief investigator into paranormal phenomena and pay me an annual salary that was more than five times what Nora was paying me, but I chose not to follow up on his offer because something about his long, rambling letter suggested to me that he might be insane.

And then I started to feel a little insane myself, after Kayleigh called me from jail.



“Crash, I need you to come bail me out. I fucked up.”

“Where are you?” I ask Kayleigh, not understanding.

“I’m in jail. Me an’ Francesca got busted at the flower stand for sellin’ pot.”

“Can they lock you up for that? I thought pot possession was just a misdemeanor in California.”

“Not when you get caught with three pounds of primo bud.”

“Shit! What do you need me to do?”

“Come get us at the SLO County jail. The judge just set our bail. I couldn’t call you before then.”

“So how much is bail?”

“Fifty grand.”

“For both of you?”

“Each.”

“I don’t have that kind of money.”

“You’ll have to get one of those bail bond guys then. They’ll know what to do.”

“Okay, but I’ve never done this before.”

“Don’t worry. Jus’ get here fast as you can and we’ll figure out the rest. But hurry. There’s a couple o’ gross bull-dyke lesbos in here, an’ they been talkin’ dirty to me.”

“Okay. I’m on my way.”

“You’re my one phone call, Crash... don’t let me down.”

My brokerage account hasn’t been above \$100,000 since I completed my physical therapy five years ago. And I don’t

have any other assets to use as collateral, aside from my beat-to-crap Jeep. If I'm going to convince a bail bondsman that I'm good for a hundred grand, I'll have to borrow some money. My first thought, after I hang up the phone, is to call James.

"James, it's Crash. Have you heard?"

"Francesca already called me," James says, not even attempting to hide the anger in his voice. "I told her to go fuck herself."

"That's pretty harsh."

"Hey, I'm not the one who came up with the bright idea to sell dope down at the flower stand. She's a big girl. She can do her time like all the other pathetic drug dealers who get caught."

"I barely have enough money to bail out Kayleigh. I was hoping you'd let me borrow some, maybe."

"So you can bail out Francesca, too? No fuckin' way."

"It's the right thing to do. She's still your wife, even though she moved out on you."

"Don't be naïve. If you bail out Kayleigh and Francesca, you'll be flat-on-your-ass broke after they skip bail. Which they'll do - no question."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Look, I've been around both of those girls a helluva lot longer than you have. There's no way they're gonna spend a few years in prison when they could be doing bong hits and getting their pussies licked in Amsterdam instead."

Money being on my mind, I ask: "But how would they support themselves?"

“Girls like that never have to worry about money. They’re users.” And here James sticks in the metaphorical knife and twists it. “Look at how long it took Kayleigh to move in with you. What was it, a couple of days? And I’ll bet she hasn’t paid for jack shit since then, has she?”

As it happens, Kayleigh hasn’t paid for a thing since I’ve known her. I haven’t let her. But I’m not about to admit that to James.

He isn’t finished: “You’ve been busting your ass for Nora for a measly \$5.50 an hour while Kayleigh’s been raking in, like, two grand a day selling weed. Did she even offer to pay you back for the bond money you’ll have to cough up?”

She didn’t, as I recall, but maybe she just forgot to mention it.

“I don’t care about money right now,” I say, knowing how lame that sounds.

“You will later.”

“You don’t understand. I love her.” Acute self-consciousness is making me hyper-aware of my words as I speak them. Those last three come out like the mewling of a blind puppy about to be run over by a dump truck.

“I’m just trying to protect you, man,” says James. “Love is for suckers and self-adoring asshole opportunists. Which one are you?”

He hangs up on me before I can give him an answer.

Shit.... It takes me a few minutes to come up with a Plan B, but then I realize that Plan B should have been my initial plan all along. I decide to drive my Jeep over to Buckthorn Manor to have a chat with Skeeze.



Things move very quickly after I explain the situation to Skeeze. He keeps saying, "Dude, I've got this... I got this..." as he gathers Saran-wrapped stacks of hundred dollar bills from the candy apple red Snap-On tool storage locker in his subterranean dope-growing lair. He unrolls a large Army green duffel bag and fills it full of cash - much more cash than he would seem to need. He also tosses in more than a dozen bricks of hash.

"Skeeze, what're you doing? I'm pretty sure bail bondsmen don't take drugs as collateral."

"No, but my attorney does," Skeeze informs me. "That's not why I'm bringing it, though. After we spring Kayleigh and Francesca, I'll be driving down to Santa Barbara to buy a boat. Hash is the preferred medium of exchange at the Montecito Yacht Club, or so I've been told."

"Why do you need a boat all of a sudden?"

"Once Kayleigh and Francesca are out on bail, they'll need to get out of the country right away; Kayleigh, especially. She's already been busted for pot twice: once in West Virginia, and once here. The courts hate repeat offenders. If she goes to trial, they'll probably put her away for years."

"She never told me she'd been arrested before."

"Well, there's probably a lot you don't know about her. You guys are still new as a couple, right? Once I get her down to Costa Rica or wherever, I'll send you a plane ticket so you can fly down and hook up with her again. That's the least I can do for you guys, considering."

"Thanks, Skeeze. You're a man of honor and integrity, even if you don't look like one."

"I guess I should put on some clothes, huh? You caught me during my traditional afternoon *porn siesta*."

"I was wondering why your palm felt so greasy when we shook hands earlier."

"No worries, dude. That was just hand lotion, not man lotion."

When he'd greeted me at the front door, Skeeze had been holding a still-smoking bong and wearing nothing more than his tie-dyed chenille bathrobe - open at the waist - and a tiger-striped Speedo tucked away in the crevasse beneath the pale, hairy Half Dome of his beer gut. He still hasn't put on anything resembling more appropriate attire for meeting an attorney - or buying a yacht.

Despite Skeeze's assurances about the hand lotion, I walk over to a long, stainless steel sink on the far side of the room and nearly scald myself under the hot water while washing my hands with a bar of Lava soap. I see that most of the marijuana plants on that side of the room have been cut down since my last visit. They now hang upside down like bats from clotheslines strung across the high ceiling. Along the back wall, countless Mason jars full of buds are stacked on crude wooden shelves in a way that reminds me of the displays of homemade preserves at county fairs. Skeeze still has a lot of product to move if he plans to leave for Costa Rica in a few days, but that doesn't seem to be what's on his mind:

"Dude," he says to me, "I'll be taking Coyote with me, but I need someone to take care of my rats while I'm gone."

"Can't they pretty much fend for themselves?"

"For a few days, yeah. But they'll still need someone to feed them goat milk and *tacos con queso*."

"I guess I could do it."

"Would you? That'd be so cool!"

Skeeze wraps me in a greasy bear hug. The stench of cheap hand lotion on his bare skin is close to overwhelming. He rubs his scraggly red beard against my cheek and then he backs up to say: "Think of my place as *su otra casita* - your other little house. I know you'll be totally reliable and treat those rats like they're your own. And then, when you fly down to bang the shit outta Kayleigh, I'll just fly right back and take over."

I realize I've just signed myself up to be a rat lackey. *Why do I do these things to myself?* I wonder. Inwardly groaning, I ask, "How many tacos do the rats eat in a normal day?"

"About fifty. But it's only every other day. And you don't have to make any. I just buy 'em in bulk from Rosa's Cantina. They even deliver."

"That's a relief," I say.

"I'll leave you with plenty of cash - enough for a year, at least, although I don't plan on being gone anywhere near that long. I have revolving credit lines with both Rosa's and Soderbergh Farms for the goat milk. You just have to pay the delivery guys at the end of the month. It's pretty simple, really. And the cool thing is, while you're hanging out here with the rats, you can watch all the porn you want."

"Oh yay! I'm really looking forward to that."

Skeeze fails to detect my underlying sarcasm. "Just be careful where you aim," he says earnestly. "You've heard that joke about the guy who was so poor he had to jack off to feed his cat? Well, you really don't want to see rats going after your spunk. Trust me, it'll seriously gross you out."

"I'll take your word on that."

"The raccoon is even worse."

"Okay, Skeeze, I get the idea...."

"That Señor Pepe's a mad dive bomber. He wants to drink it straight from the tap."

"Skeeze! Enough!"

I'm generally not the squeamish type, but Skeeze somehow knows just how to push my deeply sublimated squeam buttons. The thought of that bandit-masked furball, Señor Pepe, leaping like an ungainly flying squirrel from the chandelier to chow down on my ejaculate right as I'm in mid-orgasm... well, it's just a little more than I can take. Skeeze, that skeezy bastard, has definitely earned his name.

While I wait upstairs in the main parlor, admiring the cobwebs hanging from the rafters, Skeeze changes into a blinding white tuxedo smartly set off by a powder blue rayon tuxedo shirt with three rows of extravagant ruffles down the front and an extra-wide Superfly collar. When he returns to the parlor, he completes the outfit by donning a pair of Oakley sunglasses with iridescent bug eye lenses. He looks like he's ready to take a pimply fat girl to his senior prom.

"C'mon, Crash, let's go bust those chicks out of jail!" Skeeze says with B-movie bravado, as if he's about to pump-load a shotgun and walk out the door in heroic slow-mo. I stoop to pick up the duffel bag, which - loaded with hash and around a cool half million - is just as impressive in its own B-movie way.

I find myself hoping that Buckthorn Manor isn't surrounded by a SWAT team or a squadron of rotor-

silenced black helicopters dangling rappelling cords for DEA agents to slide down with semi-automatic rifles slung across their backs. I'm not feeling up to doing a Cambria remake of Al Pacino's famous death scene in *Scarface* just yet.



We drive to San Luis Obispo in separate vehicles – me in my Jeep and Skeeze in a shabby 1959 Jaguar XK150 Drophead Coupé Convertible painted the same lurid blue as his rayon tuxedo shirt. Our first stop is the plush private office of Ernesto “Speedy” Gonzales, Skeeze’s longtime and much beleaguered attorney.

“*¡El Bellaco! ¡Hola, amigo!*” Ernesto shouts as he stands up from behind his cluttered desk. Eyeing the duffel bag, he asks, “What have you brought for me? A gift?”

“I need you to get some friends of mine out of jail,” Skeeze says, unzipping the duffel bag without ceremony and counting out stacks of hundred dollar bills on the edge of Ernesto’s desk. “I’m pretty sure they’ll be skipping bail, so I’m paying you up front for the full amount, plus the usual fee for your discretion.”

“Skipping bail, man, that’s some serious shit. You sure there’s nothing else to be done? Hey, I’m Ernesto, by the way...” he says, leaning across the desk to shake my hand. “And you?”

“Gordon.”

“*Crash* Gordon. He’s totally cool,” Skeeze assures Ernesto. “His girlfriend is one of the people you’ll be bailing out.”

"She got caught selling pot..." I start to explain, but Ernesto cuts me short:

"I could tell that just by the company you keep, *ese*. It's a moral outrage, the way our government locks up innocent people for smoking God's own natural, life-enhancing herb. *¡Pendejos!* I've vowed to fight those fuckers and their fucking injustices until my dying days."

"Provided he gets paid under the table in cash, of course – or in the condensed form of the herb in question." Skeeze opens the duffel bag wide to show Ernesto the bricks of hash lining its bottom.

"You brought hash? *¡Mi hermano!* I love you!"

"It's not for you. I have to go buy a boat today."

"Looks like you want a big one."

"I'll be sailing down to the land of your ancestors, so I figure, *why fuck around?* I intend to get something bad-ass and seaworthy."

"*Bellaco*, since when do you know how to sail?"

"I'm buying a yacht. You just point it in the direction you want to go in and step on the gas. How hard can it be?"

"I'm glad you're paying me up front, *ese*. I get all worried about you when you say shit like that."

"Being an attorney for the *Sureños* isn't exactly safe either, dude."

"Those guys love me, man. I get them out of jail all the time."

"Speaking of which, I need you to broker a deal for me. I have a huge amount of product that needs to be offloaded tonight. I don't have time to mess around with my usual

dealers. I need a team that can get in and get out with the whole load without getting caught. You know anybody?"

"Yeah, I might know some guys...."

"They have to be totally trustworthy. I'll be letting them inside my home. The deal's worth a half million, easy."

"You remember Paco and Leo?"

"Yeah! I like those guys. They've been to the house before."

"They have direct ties to the Sinaloa Cartel now. They can get you the kind of money you want and do the job right. They'll be discreet."

"Let's do it!" says Skeeze.

"Isn't that what Gary Gilmore said right before he sat down in front of a firing squad?" I ask Skeeze.

"Your friend is the cautious type," Ernesto observes. "I like that. He'll go before the judge with me and say he arranged the bail for your *amigas*. You, *Bellaco*, must stay as far away from these legal proceedings as possible. I hope no one called you from prison."

"No one did."

"Good! Then go buy your boat, *ese*. I'll call you tonight about that other business. I should know more by then. *¡Vaya con Dios!*"

"*Vaya con Dios* yourself, you beautiful sleazebag," Skeeze says on his way out.



So that's how I ended up spending the day with Ernesto "Speedy" Gonzales. We saw some people at the SLO County

jail, had lunch, stood in front of a judge, and by around seven o'clock that night Kayleigh and Francesca were released from custody. After thanking Ernesto for living up to his nickname, I drove with Kayleigh back to Cambria. Francesca wanted to stay behind to see about getting her car out of the impound lot and to consult with Ernesto about some other legal matters. She told us she'd get back to Kayleigh's place (now hers) on her own sometime later.

After Kayleigh took a quick shower at my place (now ours), we spent the rest of the evening drinking and fucking. What we did was too raw and carnal to call 'making love.' Something about those gross bull-dyke lesbians must have gotten Kayleigh's libido really worked up. As for me, I have to admit that Kayleigh starred in some fantasies that went flickering through my mind's eye, inspired by women-in-prison movies like *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS* and *Caged Heat*.

At around midnight, with Kayleigh still straddling me in our narrow redwood bed, I started to wonder how Skeeze's big marijuana deal was going down. I mentioned it to her and that got us talking about whether she would be fleeing the country on Skeeze's boat in the next few days. She didn't think she had any other viable options.

It had been a clean bust, according to Kayleigh. A grey-haired old lady had stopped by the flower stand to buy some tulips and started talking to Kayleigh about the pain her glaucoma was causing her. Kayleigh asked her, quite innocently, if she'd ever tried smoking pot to ease her suffering. The old lady said she hadn't, but with a conspiratorial wink and a nod she said she'd always wanted to try it. One thing led to another and Kayleigh ended up selling her a few buds at a reduced price. There was no way

Kayleigh could have known that the little old lady was an undercover cop, but she soon found that out when the squad cars started pulling up. With the amount of pot they'd been caught with - two pounds of buds hidden beneath the skirts of the flower stand and other pound sitting in the trunk of Francesca's Porsche - both girls expected to be sentenced to prison for at least a few years.

"That ol' bitch was so wrinkled an' gray, she coulda been my grandma. She didn't look nothin' like Angie Dickinson in *Police Woman*," Kayleigh complained to me.

"The cops are as bad as the criminals; they never play fair," I sympathized. "If it were up to me, *all* police women would look like Angie Dickinson."

"Oh, you wish. You're such a perv, Crash." She squeezed my dick with her Kegel muscles and we started fucking again with vigor.

"You better come live with me down in Mexico or wherever we end up, okay? You have to promise!" she huffed.

"I promise!" I huffed back.

"You still haven't fucked me in the butt yet. We better do that before I take off." She reached between her thighs and switched orifices on me before I was even aware of what she was doing.

"Holy shit, that's tight!" My dick felt like a greasy cork being jammed up inside the neck of a wine bottle.

"You're fucking my ass, Crash. I was a virgin back there until jus' now."

"It's a real honor."

She sat down hard, bouncing on me like she was testing out a new sofa. That did it. My legs shot out straight and I clenched my toes as a majestic geyser of spunk spumed out of me.

Kayleigh slapped my forehead, hard, to get me to re-focus. "I just gave up my asshole's virginity to you, fucker. Now we *have* to stay together."

"Okay. Fine by me." My nutsack was still twitching. *Jesus, that was intense.* I was suddenly a huge fan of anal sex.

"You better not ditch me."

"No way."

"I'm sorry I got busted an' all, but true love can get through anything."

"You bet."

"I really like your penis all up inside my butthole."

"Me too!"

"But maybe now we should try an' get some sleep."

Sleep came to me like I was falling off a cliff.



"*Crash. Wake up...*" Kayleigh whispers to me from within a dream about swimming with poisonous sea serpents.

"Hmm? Wha - ?" I blink my eyes as the world comes back into focus. "Oh... hey, Angelbutt."

There's a look of concern in Kayleigh's sky blue eyes. "You need to get up," she says. "James is out on the front deck. I think he's in trouble."

I throw on yesterday's clothes and go out the french doors that open onto the cabin's deck, where I find James sitting

in the green Adirondack chair, looking pale and bloated and drunk enough to be mistaken for a cerebral palsy victim. There's a torn, half-empty twelve-pack carton of Coors Light in his lap and a .357 Magnum resting in the palm of his right hand.

"Francesca's divorcing me," he says, waving hello to me with the gun. It's a frightening display of nonchalance.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but you can't honestly say it comes as a surprise." I pull up another deck chair and sit down next to him.

"I still thought we had a chance at making up." He taps the edge of the gun's barrel against his forehead, as if he's deep in thought. "But not this time. She came to the radio station and served me divorce papers while I was on the air. I guess she thought I wouldn't blow up on her that way - but I did, anyway."

"I'll bet that was a spritely little wake up for your early morning listeners."

James pulls a cassette tape from the front pocket of his blue flannel shirt. "I've got the tape. Wanna listen to it?"

"Not right now. Maybe later."

"I've been sitting here for the last hour thinking about blowing my head off."

"On my deck? Great. That's so considerate of you, James."

"I was gonna leave a note so the police would know it wasn't your fault. But then I realized I didn't have any paper."

"I think we're all out, too," I lie.

"Is the stationary store open this early?"

"Why don't we take a walk down to the beach instead?"

“Okay. Whatever.”

James staggers to his feet, clutching the twelve-pack carton and his .357 like a toddler gripping his security blanket.

“Uhm, let’s leave the gun here,” I say, gently prying it from his damp fingers. I go inside and put the gun on top of my writing desk. “We’re just going to the beach,” I tell Kayleigh as she flashes her fearful blue eyes at me, wanting to know what’s going on, but knowing better than to ask in front of James. “Don’t shoot anyone while I’m gone, okay?”

“Be careful,” she whispers to me.

“I will,” I whisper back.

I step back out onto the deck, feeling emboldened by the love of a good woman.



How do you talk a friend out of suicide? Who knows what really works and what doesn’t when you’re dealing with someone caught in the death-spiral of nihilism or driven crazy by grief? I’m certainly no expert, but I’ll tell you what I did:

It was just a short walk to Moonstone Beach. Once we got there, I started talking to James about the everyday wonder of the sun and the sea air and good, simple food. It was truly a beautiful morning, so Nature seemed to be backing me up on those observations. Sharp-eyed seagulls glided past us on the cool, salt-scented breeze in a sky painted a gorgeous pink by the dawn. Sandpipers skittered at our feet. The waves crashed with muted roars that sounded like tigers sighing in their sleep. A few people were out for early

morning walks, but for the most part the beach was deserted. We cracked open a couple of beers and took our shoes off so we could walk along the edge of the surf, even though at that time of the year it was really too cold for bare feet.

Knowing James shared my love of literature, I talked about Steinbeck's happy *paisanos* in *Tortilla Flat*, how they'd get together to talk over a bottle of cheap wine and how that would be enough for them to be gloriously content. I talked about movies yet unseen and books unread. I steered around the topic of women when James started complaining about their evil ways. Instead, I told him that he had a friend in me and other friends who cared for him, as well.

"No, you're my *only* friend," James corrected me. "Everyone else likes Francesca way better."

If I was going to be honest, I liked Francesca better as a person, too - but I had more history with James. So I aimed for something less than perfect candor:

"I'm sure you have lots of friends," I said. "What about Skeeze?"

"Fuck Skeeze!" James ranted. "He's sailing off to Pago Pago with my woman! Yours, too! Did you know that? He's helping them skip bail. I'll bet he's the one who's been fucking her all along, that treacherous eunuch!"

Knowing Skeeze, that seemed unlikely. "I can almost guarantee you that Skeeze hasn't had sex with Francesca," I said.

"Oh, yeah? How would *you* know?"

"Well, for one thing, he doesn't seem like her type."

"Really? So what's her type then?"

“Not you in your present condition, obviously. But someone like you, before you started drinking your brains out.”

“Are you implying that I might have an alcohol problem?” James chugged the last of his beer and thrust his hand deep into the Coors carton to bring up another can.

“I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.”

“Want one?” he asked, shaking the near-empty carton at me.

“Sure.” I drained the rest of my own beer and grabbed another. I wasn’t used to drinking so early in the morning. I was already starting to catch a buzz.

“Get this: Francesca asked me to pack up all her shit for her and put it in the driveway. She said some guy in a minivan would come by later this afternoon to put it in storage for her.”

“So she serves you divorce papers, but she still expects you to take orders like a pussy-whipped husband.” I was acting slightly outraged to show James I was still on his side.

“She said she’s afraid to do it herself because she thinks I might kill her. Can you believe that?”

“Oh. Well, you wouldn’t *really* kill her, would you?”

“Honestly? When she handed me those divorce papers, I felt like shooting her in the cunt. But I knew that would be wrong. The fact of the matter is: I’d kill myself way before I’d get around to killing her or anyone else.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Not the part about killing yourself... the part about not killing other people.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t have to be such a haughty fucking moralist about it.”

“Sorry. I have a lot of drinking to do before I catch up to your level of enlightened inebriation.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be talking me out of killing myself right now, or are we done with that? Because I’m just not feelin’ the love.”

“Oh, fuck it. Let’s just go get drunk and I’ll help you move Francesca’s stuff.”

“Now that’s spoken like a true friend!” James slapped me across the back, dropping the beer carton in his exuberance, which he then tripped over, falling to his knees in the surf.

“You’re all right, Crash...” he said as I helped him back up.



I’m in the great room of James’ soon-to-be bachelor pad, sorting out books. James and Francesca had optimistically mixed their literature collections together and it’s now my job to separate everything. Most of it seems pretty straightforward: Hunter S. Thompson, *James*; Pearl S. Buck, *Francesca*; Norman Mailer, *James*; Nadine Gordimer, *Francesca*; Charles Bukowski, *James* obviously; Dion Fortune, just as obviously *Francesca*.

Etcetera....

There’s also an extra pile for the books I’m not sure about. *Cannery Row*, *Sweet Thursday*, and *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*... would those belong to James or Francesca? They both like Steinbeck. *The Portable Dorothy*

Parker... a woman writer, but she seems more like James' type. *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* by Ursula Le Guin... probably Francesca's due to her feminist leanings, although James is the science fiction and horror buff. Sometimes it gets confusing. Then relief comes when I see a big swath of H.P. Lovecraft and Stephen King and I think: *James, for sure.*

Upstairs in the pimped out master bedroom, James is packing away the contents of Francesca's underwear drawer – probably sniffing her panties one last time before they're gone forever. I'd volunteered for that job myself after the seventh or ninth beer, to save James the heartache, but he nobly chose to do it alone.

From somewhere close by, I hear the rough gurgle and grunt of someone pulling the hand cord on a balky chainsaw, trying to start it up. *Maybe Harley's taking a tree down in the neighborhood,* I think to myself, reminded that I owe my current position as the *Cambria Insurrectionist's* Staff Photographer to Nora's son-in-law's decision to work full-time as a tree surgeon. But then when the chainsaw snarls to life with an incredibly loud, furious buzz, I know instantly that it's coming from upstairs, inside the house. I go up the spiral staircase to investigate.

When I open the door to James and Francesca's bedroom I find the room filling up with plumes of bluish-grey smoke. James is in there applying the 24" blade of an orange Husqvarna chainsaw to one of the naked cherubs on Francesca's antique headboard behind the waterbed. The blade chews an ugly V-shaped gash through the cherub's dimpled cavorting rump as he shouts:

"So I'm just another notch in the ol' headboard, *huh?! This'll help you keep score, you horny skank!*"

“James! What’re you doing?” I yell.

Startled, James turns at the waist to look at me, staggering sideways as he does so, thrown off-balance in his extreme drunkenness. The still-spinning chainsaw blade digs into the side of the waterbed, slicing right through the Tibetan Snow Leopard fur bedspread and everything below it, releasing a huge sheet of water onto the floor.

“Shit!” James yelps as the water soaks his feet. He at least has the presence of mind to shut off the chainsaw and try to close the hole in the thick plastic liner, but that’s obviously not going to work. The hole just tears open wider and soon the entire bedroom floor is flooded ankle-deep in water.

I notice the laces on James’ filthy tennis shoes have become untied, floating about like the hair of a drowning victim. The whole room stinks of scorched sawdust and oily exhaust fumes. There’s another silver twelve-pack carton of Coors Light on one of the antique dressers. I wade over to it across the swamped Persian carpet, sending ripples out across the water’s surface. “How ‘bout a beer break?” I suggest, tossing James a can.

He catches it one-handed and pops the tab, spraying a sudden gush of beer foam straight up his nose.

“Sorry... I guess they’re a little warm,” I apologize, even though they’re not *my* beers.

After wiping his face on his sleeve, James pours the entire beer down his throat and gargles with it. Then he lets loose with a sort of anguished gorilla-roar, punctuated at the end by something like the word “FUCK!” He kicks up a spray of water while jumping up and down beside the now flaccid bed.

While he's not exactly Gene Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain*, the situation strikes me as comic. I can't help it... I start laughing.

"How can you laugh at this?" James asks me, outraged, but already starting to get enough perspective to comprehend the cosmic joke. "Look what she's done to me!" he bellows, kicking up more water, splashing me with it. "*Look!*"

"That's what you get for stealing her away from me at Dinkey Creek," I say. "I'll bet you're sorry now...."



My smugness didn't last, of course. It never does in this upside down, broken world where the Gods of Irony seem to hold sway.

I found my own love life travails waiting for me when I finally got home. There was a note from Kayleigh tacked to the front door:

Dear Crash,

Skeeze came by while you were gone and said we had to go. I guess somethin went sideways with his deal last night and if we stick around it wont be safe. I tried calling you at James house but no one picked up. Sorry I didnt get to say goodbye. See you down south real soon. Dont forget your promise. I miss you already.

Love, Kayleigh

I hoped she was okay.

With nothing else to do but brood, I immediately phoned James and asked him if he wanted to come over for dinner and some more alcohol-fueled commiseration.

That was probably a mistake on my part. I can see that now, in retrospect. When you wake up and find a vampire hanging around outside your window, you're not supposed to invite it in for pizza.

AT THE MOVIES OF MADNESS

James arrives bearing gifts. From my deck, I watch him coming up the steps with a bottle of Cazadores tequila and a life-sized cardboard cutout of Elvira, Mistress of the Dark – the goth Valley Girl with big tits who hosts a weekly horror show on cable channel 33 called *Elvira's Movie Macabre*.

“Look what I got!” James boasts. “Francesca never let me take it out to show people, but now that she’s gone I can do whatever I want.”

He gets up to the deck, winded, as I say to him: “Nice. I take it the cardboard movie displays of Joyce Carol Oates were all sold out?”

“Man, what’s got you in such a pissy mood?”

“I already told you. Kayleigh’s gone.”

“Well, cheer up. Elvira’s here to keep you company.” Indicating the deck’s double french doors, he says, “D’you mind if we go inside? It’s too breezy for her out here.”

“Go ahead.”

James opens the doors and goes in to stand Elvira up against the redwood wall just below where the hammock hangs with its blankets that look like they were made from a skinned werewolf. “Hey, nice place, by the way....”

“Yeah, I forgot – this is the first time you’ve seen it, isn’t it?” I follow James inside. We both stand and stare at

Elvira's curvy vampiress figure. "I can't believe you walked all the way over here with her."

"Hey, what can I say? I was too drunk to drive. But it was worth it, don't you think? I mean, doesn't she look great?"

I acknowledge that Elvira's fabulous cleavage in her clingy, low-cut black gown has a certain erotic appeal, even in just two dimensions. But it's unlikely I'll get the same thrill I got from Kayleigh if I try to sodomize her.

"Where'd you get her?" I ask James.

"It's a promo for her new movie coming out. In fact, that reminds me... we should go see it tonight! It might help us forget our troubles."

"What's it called?"

"The movie? *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark*. Duhhh. It's on a triple bill at the Sunset Drive-in with John Carpenter's *They Live* and that Rina chick's Russian porn movie, *Stalin Says*. Dude, it's like it's meant to be! We *have* to do this!"

"But neither one of us is sober enough to drive," I point out.

"So? We just need to find a designated driver. C'mon! It'll be like the old days in Kingsburg. Remember Mooney's?"

On Friday nights back in high school, one of our favorite things to do had been to get together with our (now departed) friends Skip, D.H., and Twinker to hide under a tarp in back of Hideo "Hideous" Nakamatsu's Dodge Ramcharger pick-up so Hideous could sneak us all into Mooney's Drive-In for the price of a single admission. Once there, we would break out the hidden lawn chairs - and a massive cache of beer and pot - and kick back in the pick-up bed to watch lesbian vampire movies, grindhouse-style slashers, and Russ Meyer's big-boobs-obsessed porn

extravaganzas while getting incredibly fucked up. Despite being a punk rocker, Hideous was a straight arrow who refused to get drunk or high, so he was always our designated driver.

“Okay,” I acquiesce, “it sounds fun. But who can we ask to drive us?”

“Beats the shit outta me. Like I told you, I don’t have any friends. Except for Hideous, but he’s too far away.”

It suddenly occurs to me that I’m hungry. Starving, actually. I haven’t eaten anything (unless beer counts) for at least twenty-four hours. “Let’s order some pizza,” I suggest, “and we’ll try to come up with a plan, okay?”

“Sounds good to me,” says James. “Do you like mushrooms? I have some psilocybin, if you’re interested. It could be a great way to watch Rina get raped by her big fuzzy-wuzzy bear friend.”



“So Yiffer, what’s it like, being a pizza delivery guy?”

“It’s pretty good, I guess,” answers the Yiffer in question, a pimply sixteen-year-old Scandinavian-looking kid wearing a tomato-stained Domino’s Pizza delivery polo shirt and oversized Adidas basketball shorts, despite the cold. He’s seated on the couch next to James, trying to look cool and disaffected – an almost impossible feat to pull off when you’re so clearly in the midst of that wide-eyed, big-lipped Bambi phase that most adolescent boys go through. The wispy attempt at facial hair doesn’t help.

Prince’s funky B-side remix of “Pop Life” is playing loud on the stereo. James has his baggie of magic mushrooms

prominently displayed on the coffee table and he's pouring everyone a round of tequila shots. Yiffer must think he's hanging out with the funkiest white dudes in Cambria, which isn't saying much.

I'm seated in a chair across from them, sipping a beer while I wait for the inevitable disaster.

Although he's only about six years older than Yiffer, James seems to be taking a paternal interest in the young man: "Isn't your job kind of dangerous?" he asks Yiffer. "Don't vicious dogs try and attack you?"

"Sometimes, yeah. But I've got protection." Yiffer extracts a futuristic, spring-loaded, raygun-looking thing from the surprisingly deep pocket of his basketball shorts.

"What is that, a bazooka?" James pretends to be astounded.

"It's a paintball gun."

"Lemme see!"

James takes the paintball gun and casually points it at Yiffer's head as he examines it.

"Take it back, Yiffer," I say. "Certain people shouldn't be allowed to play with paintball guns."

"You're just jealous 'cuz I got to see it first," James says to me.

"Pretty cool, huh?" says Yiffer.

"Very cool indeed," says James. He rests his arm on the back of the couch with the gun still pointed at Yiffer's head. "So tell us about your goals for the future, Yiffer. You don't plan on delivering pizzas forever, do you?"

"No way. I'm saving up so I can buy a pink van when I graduate."

“So you’re materialistic. That’s good. I like that.” James seems enthused, and Yiffer, even more so:

“Then I wanna go to France and study to be a French chef.”

“Ambitious! You’ve got some mighty fine goals there, Yiffer.”

I can see he’s getting carried away: “Yeah, and then I wanna have a big house in San Diego with a fountain and a pool in the backyard that has two dolphins in it named Laverne and Shirley.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I ask him.

“No! I think that would be so cool!”

“As do I, Yiffer,” James says, sounding like an Oxford don sipping sherry by his fireplace. “As do I.... But how will you finance all these worthy projects?”

I can already see where this is heading. “Here it comes, Yiffer. Get ready,” I tell him.

“There’s only one way, of course,” says James. “You’ll have to become a drug dealer.”

With sinister ease, James pulls the trigger on the paintball gun. There’s a spring-loaded *THWACK!* as a red paintball smacks against the side of Yiffer’s head, just above his ear. It looks like blood soaking through his straggly blonde hair.

“GOH.... Crap!”

Yiffer milks the moment by falling sideways off the couch and flopping about like a clubbed baby seal. He’s a good sport.

“You’ll also have to sell your soul to Satan,” James amends. He gets up off the couch and grabs Yiffer by his ankles. Yiffer is just a little guy and James has no trouble

dragging him to the center of the room and spinning him around in a circle, so that Yiffer lifts off the ground and gets airborne. As the dizzy-making spinning continues, James shouts:

“I’m gonna sell my soul to Satan! Say it!”

“No! *Help!*” yelps Yiffer.

“I, Yiffer, will sell my eternal soul to mighty Lucifer! Say it, goddammit!”

“Let him go, James,” I shout, but without much conviction. It’s actually kind of fun to watch.

“Okay! I’ll sell my soul!” Yiffer yowls.

James lets go of Yiffer’s ankles, sending him sailing over the couch and onto the coffee table, where he lands with a thud, sending beer cans and tequila shots flying everywhere. The bag of mushrooms and a fortunately placed throw pillow help break his fall. Yiffer crawls onto the floor, dizzy but relatively unharmed.

His ordeal isn’t over, however: James strides back to the couch and picks up the paintball gun again.

“If you don’t sell your soul to the Dark Lord and join his hellish crusade, then I’ll have to put you down like the scurvy dog you’re sure to become.”

Another paintball slams into Yiffer’s back, near his kidneys, as the poor kid scrambles to his feet and runs for the front door. As he passes the hammock, he dives for cover just as James fires again.

The second shot misses Yiffer and instead hits the life-sized cardboard cutout of Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, blasting a golf-ball-sized hole right through her forehead.

The red paint splattering the wall behind her looks amazingly like brain matter.

We all stop in our tracks, stunned by the *faux-gruesomeness*. Yiffer is the first to break the silence:

"Oh, sick!"

James walks over and puts a hand on Yiffer's shoulder, handing him the paintball gun with an air of awed reverence, like an aging samurai master passing a legendary Bushido blade to his ninja nephew. "You just killed Elvira," James says in a somber croak. "Well, actually, I did... although you could've saved her if you'd taken the hit for her. But you didn't. So now you're one of us - *the Accursed*."

"Did you guys pay me for the pizza already? I forget...."

"Fuck delivering pizzas for the man!" shouts James, rallying. "Let's go see a movie!"

"But I still have three hours left on my shift."

"Call your boss and tell him your car got stolen," James suggests.

"Really?"

"Yeah. You can even say we stole it. We'll vouch for you, won't we, Crash?"

"Sure, James. Let's call the Domino's Pizza manager and tell him we're stealing Yiffer's car *right now*," I say in a tone that accuses him of taking his douchebaggery to new lows.

"Okay, so maybe that won't work. But how bad would it be, Yiffer, if you just told your boss your car won't start?"

"Not bad, I guess." Yiffer's gaze drifts upward toward the Tibetan prayer flags hanging from the rafters, as if he's asking himself, *Who would be more fun to hang out with:*

these guys, or the Dalai Lama? “You guys were my second-to-last delivery,” he tells us. “I only have one pizza left before I have to go back for more orders.”

“Great! So tell your boss you’re real sorry, but that last delivery just ain’t gonna happen. Tell him you already have a tow truck on the way, but you’ll have to take the rest of the night off. He’ll understand. I promise.”

“You *probably* won’t lose your job,” I reason.

“And to make up for your lost wages, we’ll pay you fifty bucks if you drive us to the movies,” James says magnanimously. “Plus, free popcorn.”

Yiffer is definitely thinking about it. “What would we go see?” he asks James.

“First, the critically acclaimed film, *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark* - so we can all pay our respects. Then John Carpenter’s *They Live*, which should have monsters in it. After that, we’ll be watching a Russian porn flick called *Stalin Says*, starring a friend of ours who I’m sure you’ll enjoy seeing naked.”

“Sounds awesome. Where’s your phone?”



After the mendacious phone call to Yiffer’s manager, James and I eat the psilocybin ‘shrooms and then we all three hit the highway in a filthy white VW Rabbit. Yiffer drives (it’s his mother’s car), James rides shotgun, while I slouch in the backseat with two six-packs of Corona and a thick red insulated Domino’s Pizza delivery bag stinking of pepperoni.

“You won’t regret this, Yiffer,” says James. But I have a feeling that he might.

By the time we get to the drive-in, *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark* is already underway. It doesn’t look like we’ve missed much, however. Elvira’s persona is a campy blend of Mae West and Morticia Addams, and she’s amusing to watch, but her acting isn’t likely to reveal any hidden depths. She’s all surface. While that surface is curvaceous in the extreme, her appeal is ruined for me by her heavy eye makeup, which emphasizes the sharp points at the interior corners of her eyes in a way that strikes me as grotesque. But maybe that’s just the mushrooms kicking in, making me hypersensitive to visual stimuli.

From what I can gather, Elvira has recently inherited a spooky mansion, a poodle with a mohawk, and a black magic recipe book from a witchy aunt who lived in Falwell, Massachussets.

“Is that supposed to be where Jerry Falwell grew up?” James asks mockingly.

“The Reverend Falwell was actually born and raised in Lynchburg, Virginia,” I answer, “which seems appropriate for a holier-than-thou hatemonger like him, if you think about it.”

(Onomastics – the study of the history and origin of proper names – is sort of a specialty of mine. When combined with my particular brand of semiotics – speculations about the occult or symbolic significance of particular words – it sometimes leads to strange new connections that help me see the world in a different way. For instance, the “fall well” in Reverend Falwell and the “lynch” in Lynchburg has got me thinking about the Gnostic concept of Archons and the world’s history of religious persecution. But for the most

part, Onomastic Semiotics – or Semiotic Onomatology – probably falls into the more general category of cerebral onanism – or mental masturbation.)

As the movie progresses, we find out that Elvira wants to sell her newly-inherited mansion as quickly as possible so she can get the \$50,000 she needs to guarantee a performance space for her burlesque act in Las Vegas, which represents the culmination of her career aspirations. When the mansion gets no offers, she tries to raise money with a Flashdance-inspired dance performance at Falwell's local movie theater, where she's tarred and feathered by a jealous, flat-chested rival. Elvira retaliates by bringing a casserole to the church potluck that incites an orgy among the town's normally uptight citizens, who try to burn her at the stake after they've sobered up. While Elvira is trussed up like Jacques de Molay with flames licking at her stiletto heels, she gets the inspired notion to shoot a bolt of lightning from her aunt's magic ring, causing it to rain. She then makes her escape and does battle with her nefarious uncle, an overweening warlock, who wants the black magic recipe book for his own malignant ends. Somehow, Elvira triumphs – with a big assist from the mohawked poodle. The movie ends with Elvira performing her burlesque act in Las Vegas, besequinned and twirling her boobie tassels like a pro.

(I have to admit I couldn't take my eyes off those boobie tassels. Extra-busty female hypnotherapists should seriously consider incorporating them into their work routines.)

"Well, that was cheesy, but filled with vampire-bimbo goodness," James says as the end credits roll.

"Was Elvira a vampire or a witch?" Yiffer wants to know.

“With tits like that, who cares?”

“More of a witch,” I say to Yiffer. He deserves an answer. “She didn’t suck anyone’s blood, so far as I could tell.”

“I was hoping she’d suck something else,” James says with his characteristic lewdness. “But yeah, she’s definitely a witch,” he concurs, “just like our stoner ex-girlfriends – those bitches.”

“Speak for yourself. I really miss my own stoner witch girlfriend,” I mope. “Did I tell you Kayleigh shot a ball of lightning at me the other night when she was pissed? Just like Elvira, only it really happened.”

“You already told me.”

“Oh yeah. After the beach, but before you chainsawed the waterbed, right?”

“Wait! You took a chainsaw to a waterbed?” Yiffer asks James.

“Long story...” says James, “and kind of stupid, actually. I flooded my own house.”

“Dude, that’s so rad!” Yiffer cracks up.

“You should get someone in there to clean it up,” I advise James, “otherwise you’ll end up with a mold problem.”

“I just can’t deal with it right now. I’m too fucked up. Can I stay at your place tonight? I’ll sleep in the hammock.”

“Sure. You’re welcome any time,” I say. But as soon as the words leave my mouth I get a feeling of foreboding, as if I’ve just left myself open to some seriously bad juju. When it comes to such things – *when something wicked this way comes* – my intuition is almost never wrong.

I probably won’t be getting much sleep. Having James as an overnight guest will be like having an eighteen-foot-long

alligator dozing under my bed. He doesn't exactly inspire trust these days.



About ten minutes later the drive-in screen lights up with the next feature. During *They Live's* opening credits, we get our first glimpse of the movie's hero: "Rowdy" Roddy Piper, a handsome, semi-famous show wrestler with long blonde hair. He's playing a character named John Nada (a name we won't discover until the final credits roll). Nada shows up in a train yard, looking like he's just gotten off a long ride in a boxcar. Wearing a backpack topped with a rolled up sleeping bag, he strides into the foreground like Clint Eastwood in any number of spaghetti westerns. He's headed toward the mirrored skyscrapers of downtown Los Angeles.

As Nada passes homeless people dodging the rain under cardboard boxes, the credits inform us that the movie is based on the short story "Eight O'clock in the Morning" by Ray Nelson. The screenplay is credited to someone named Frank Armitage (a pseudonym for John Carpenter, I'll find out later).

"Frank Armitage... I know that name," James says. "He's a character in 'The Dunwich Horror' by H.P. Lovecraft."

"And Ray Nelson used to be best buddies with Philip K. Dick," I tell him. "They even dropped acid together back in the sixties and co-wrote a novel called *The Ganymede Takeover*. It's about an alien invasion of telepathic worms that end up controlling the world for a while, until they get wiped out by a psychotronic weapon that turns bad dreams into reality. It's not one of Dick's best."

"So you guys read a lot, huh?" says Yiffer.

"Yeah, it's part of our sacred duty to the arts," says James. "We're both writers."

This comes as news to me.

"I'm like H.P. Lovecraft, only with a sense of humor and a bigger penis," James tells Yiffer. "And Crash here is a famous journalist, as you would know if you ever read the *Cambria Insurrectionist*."

"I liked that UFO story they had in there last Friday."

"That was Crash! He wrote that!" James exults. "See?" he says to me. "You *are* famous."

"Hardly."

Up on the screen, Nada walks into an unemployment office as an announcement over the P.A. system drones: "Due to a computer error, the food stamp program has been suspended until further notice." A one-legged guy in a wheelchair rolls past him shaking his head in disgust. Moments later, Nada is seated at the desk of an especially nasty-looking employment counselor – a prim old lady who seems to derive a smug, *Schadenfreude*-style satisfaction from all the misery surrounding her.

"Last place of employment?" she asks Nada.

"Denver, Colorado," he answers. "Worked there for ten years. Then things just seemed to dry up. They lost 14 banks in one week. So... *uhm....*"

"There's nothing available for you right now," the old lady says with dismissive shrug.

"Silverado Savings and Loan was one of those banks that went bust in Denver this year," I break in. "Neil Bush – George Bush's son – was on their board of directors. You

can bet he was making some super-shady deals with his vulture capitalist buddies.”

“With his daddy about to become President, he probably thinks he can get away with anything,” says James.

“Yeah, from what I’ve read, he’s a total scumbag. It’s estimated it’ll cost American taxpayers over a billion dollars to make Silverado’s insured depositors whole, but so far Bush and his band of parasitic predators have gotten a free pass. It’s just a game to them: they make multi-million-dollar bets with other people’s money, pay themselves hefty salaries and suck up any profits – and then when the deal goes south, they socialize the losses.”

“Kind of makes me miss Billy Carter,” James says wistfully. “All he wanted to do was drink beer.”

“And take payoffs from the Libyans.”

“Oh yeah... right.”

Outside the unemployment office, Nada stops to listen to a blind street-corner preacher haranguing a small crowd:

“They have taken the hearts and minds of our leaders. They have recruited the rich and the powerful. And they have blinded us to the truth. Our human spirit is corrupted. Why do we worship greed? Because outside the limit of our sight, feeding off us, perched on top of us from birth to death, are our owners.”

“It sounds like Charles Fort’s Someone treating us like Their property, doesn’t it?” I say to James. “Not to mention the whole Loosh meme, which would have Them feeding off our suffering.”

Nada doesn’t appear to be as impressed as I am by the street preacher’s rhetoric. When the cops show up, he just walks away. *No use getting arrested as a free speech*

protester for some apocalypse-minded nutjob, his body language seems to be saying.

"This whole movie is so Looshy already," says James, vigorously rubbing the back of his neck.

"Those 'shrooms must be comin' on strong," Yiffer comments. "You guys are using words that don't even make any sense. You're just babbling."

"Watch and learn, Yiffer..." I say.

"All will be revealed," says James, shifting to his stentorian Darth Vader baritone.

"O-kaayyy..." says Yiffer, stretching out that last syllable on a rising note, as if he's humoring a pair of crazy uncles in a nursing home. "Whatever, dudes."

We watch as Nada gets a job on a construction site, where he meets a buff, friendly black co-worker – Frank Armitage – who invites him to a shantytown encampment for homeless people called Justiceville. There, they stand in line for a free meal and then go off by themselves to sit down with their paper plates on a low wall overlooking the city. As they get to know each other, Frank confides that he's been the victim of deviant swindlers in high places, just like Nada:

"I got a wife and two kids back in Detroit. Haven't seen 'em in six months. Steel mills were laying people off left and right. They finally went under. We gave the steel companies a break when they needed it. Y'know what they gave themselves? Raises."

Nada tells Frank he should have more patience with life. Frank says fuck that noise. "The whole deal's like some kind of crazy game," he tells Nada. "They put you at the starting line, and the name of the game is 'Make It Through Life' –

only everyone's looking out for themselves and looking to do you in at the same time."

"Yeah, buddy," says James. "Women, especially."

But Nada's not buying it. He says he's just looking for a chance to do some honest labor for honest pay. He believes in the American dream. Besides, "Everybody's got their own hard times these days."

"Neil Bush sure as hell doesn't have hard times," James sneers.

"You don't know..." I tell him. "Some cute little Japanese hooker might've given him a scorching case of herpes. Or his wife might be making voodoo dolls out of his pubic hair and flushing them down the toilet."

"I guess that would explain all his business deals crapping out."

Yiffer just snorts, as if he finds this sort of talk beneath him.

Night has fallen in the next scene and the denizens of Justiceville are gathered around a television set in their outdoor living room, watching an inane commercial, when a hacker interrupts the scheduled programming:

"Our impulses are being redirected," says the televised hacker - an aging college professor type with thick, black-framed glasses and a white beard and mustache. "We are living in an artificially induced state of consciousness that resembles sleep...."

The pirate broadcast keeps fading in and out of white static. The sound gets tinny. Words are dropped. "The movement was begun eight months ago by a small group of scientists who discovered, quite by accident, the signal being sent...."

More static. Nada pinches the bridge of his nose and winces. The others watching the broadcast complain that it's giving them a headache.

"The poor and the underclass are growing," the hacker persists. "Racial justice and human rights are nonexistent. They have created a repressive society and we are their unwitting accomplices. Their intention to rule rests with the annihilation of consciousness. We have been lulled into a trance. They have made us indifferent, to ourselves, to others. We are focused only on our own gain...."

It could almost be dismissed as Marxist dogma, but Nada seems to think there's more to it. He looks in the direction of a nearby church, where the blind street preacher stands mouthing the hacker's words as if he's memorized them:

"Please understand... they are safe as long as they are not discovered. That is their primary method of survival. Keep us asleep, keep us selfish, keep us sedated."

"Blow it out your ass," says one of the Justiceville drifters, switching off the television.

The next morning, Justiceville's community television is back on and the hacker is at it again:

"They are dismantling the sleeping middle class. More and more people are becoming poor. We are their cattle. We are being bred for slavery.... We cannot break their signal. Our transmitter is not powerful enough. The signal must be shut off at the source."

Nada is convinced there's something strange going on inside the church across the street, possibly related to the hacker's broadcast. He decides to check it out. Sneaking in through a dimly lit side entrance, he discovers a reel-to-reel tape recorder playing choir music in the nave. There are no

people to be seen. Cardboard boxes are stacked to the ceiling and a sort of impromptu chemistry lab has been set up on a long table.

“Looks like a meth lab,” says James.

“Like you’ve ever seen one,” I scoff.

A slogan has been painted on the far wall in dark gray paint:

**THEY LIVE
WE SLEEP**

There’s a jagged hole in the wall through which Nada can hear, but not see, the preacher, the hacker, and a guy from Justiceville named Gilbert arguing about “...robbing banks, manufacturing Hoffman lenses ‘til we’re blue in the face.” Gilbert complains: “We’re just not going to reach enough people!”

As Nada steps backward, listening, he bumps against a wall and discovers a hidden panel that opens onto a small chamber containing even more of the cardboard boxes. When he puts the panel back in place, the noise he makes attracts the blind preacher, who surprises him, roughly grabbing him by the throat.

“Let me feel your face,” the preacher says, palpating Nada’s facial features, then his hands. “Ah, you’re a working man,” he deduces. He invites Nada to join their cause, saying, “Here... it’s the revolution. Let me show you.” The preacher reaches for something in his pocket, but Nada says he has to be going. He’s not quite ready to become a revolutionary in the service of a crazed blind preacher. As

he walks away, the preacher tells him, "The world may have blinded me, but the Lord has let me see. You'll be back!"

By this time I can feel the mushrooms hitting me with their full hallucinogenic force. The theater screen seems to have moved closer to us, so that it entirely fills my field of vision. It's almost as if I'm participating in its projected action. At the same time, I can feel my soul sitting in my lap like a frightened, trembling child.

I try to comfort it.

A menacing helicopter hovers in the blue sky above the church when Nada walks out. Gilbert and the hacker run outside to see what's going on. Oddly, they both put on dark sunglasses as they look up at the helicopter, as if the sunglasses will somehow help them to see things more clearly.

Nada hasn't yet made the connection between the "Hoffman lenses" and the sunglasses, but I have - because I've seen the *They Live* movie poster with its close-up of sunglasses reflecting a hollow-eyed, grimacing ghoul in the lenses.

"The sunglasses must be the Hoffman lenses they were just talking about," I say. "*Hoffman* - like Albert Hofmann, the scientist who discovered LSD. Or Abbie Hoffman - the Yippie! who tried to levitate the Pentagon."

"Far out, man..." drawls James. I catch his underlying tone of mockery, implying that I'm making too much of a mere drive-in movie, but that's not going to stop me. My mind is churning, making connections:

"Abbie Hoffman had an article in last month's issue of *Playboy* that you should read," I say. "It's about how George Bush and his secret team of CIA veterans stole the 1980

election. If President Carter had been able to negotiate an 'October Surprise' release of the American hostages being held in Iran, he almost certainly would've been re-elected - but Bush and his intelligence operatives treasonously sabotaged those negotiations, making sure that the hostages stayed put until Reagan's first day in office. Hoffman says the whole Iran-Contra scandal really started right there, with Bush's team covertly making illegal arms deals with the Iranians, using Israel as a proxy. Later, they started diverting money from those arms deals - along with moving tons of crack and cocaine into our inner cities - so they could fund the Nicaraguan Contras in defiance of prohibitions put in place by Congress."

"You're the only person I know who reads *Playboy* for the articles," James complains.

"That's so gay of you," says Yiffer, who's apparently feeling more comfortable with us now that we're drug-addled and docile.

"You guys should care about this," I gripe. "It proves that Reagan and Bush have never given a shit about abiding by the Constitution or the rule of law."

"So tell us something we *don't* already know," says James.

Up on the screen, day has turned to night and the helicopter has returned, shining its spotlight down on the church. Police sirens wail in the distance. Gilbert and the hacker grab the blind preacher and hustle him away from the church just as a police van pulls up, disgorging a task force of policemen from its doors. More policemen in riot gear march on Justiceville with a bulldozer rolling up the street behind them. The bulldozer plows through Justiceville's tents and makeshift shacks as the riot cops

start beating people with nightsticks. It's a totalitarian government's takedown of the poor and defenseless.

"Your tax dollars at work..." I say.

"It's the 'War on Poverty' brought to you by Reagan and Bush," says James. "And that's nothing compared to what's happening to all those CIA-sponsored crack whores in the 'War on Drugs' campaign."

Nada loses track of Frank in the chaos of the assault. He runs down an alley and sees the blind preacher and the hacker up against a wall, being beaten into submission by the cops. He doesn't stop to help them. There's nothing he can do. He ends up in an abandoned apartment building with some others, watching how the rest of the confrontation plays out through the slats of a boarded up window, like some film-noir detective.

The morning after the raid on Justiceville, Nada revisits the church and finds it trashed, everything of interest confiscated by the police. He kicks open the hidden panel that he'd found the previous day. The hidden cache of cardboard boxes is still there. He takes one of the boxes and ducks down an alley with it. When he gets to a safe place, he opens the box and finds it full of sunglasses. Nada was obviously hoping for something better, but he takes a pair of glasses and hides the rest, camouflaging the box with shredded paper from a nearby trashcan.

"Sunglasses!" James sneers, expressing Nada's disappointment for him. "I was hoping for Glocks loaded with hollow-points. Or at least a few pounds of crystal meth!"

"At least it wasn't a box full of dildos," says Yiffer, looking on the bright side.

“There’s nothing sadder than a blonde-haired professional wrestler staring into a box full of dildos,” I say. “I’m pretty sure T.S. Eliot wrote a poem about that called ‘Sweeney Erect.’ At least I *think* it was about a wrestler. I’ll have to look it up again to be sure.”

“You and your goddam literary references... just watch the movie,” James grumbles at me.

“Hey, I’m not the guy who claimed to be the new H.P. Lovecraft with a big eldritch wiener.”

“That was just the drugs talking. You, of all people, should know that. I’m actually more like the alcoholic, pussy-crazed homunculus progeny of Dave Barry and Stephen King.”

I can’t come up with anything to top that, so I go back to watching the movie.

Nada has just walked out of the alley onto a bustling city street. He shares the sidewalk with well-groomed women in skirts and men in business suits – a noticeably different class of people in comparison to the scruffy denizens of Justiceville. Nada puts on the sunglasses to blend in better, but he takes them right off again when he notices that they turn the sidewalk at his feet into shades of gray. Standing still, Nada cautiously puts on the sunglasses again. Looking through their lenses turns the whole world into an eerie black-and-white art film. Even sounds seem to become more muted and ethereal. He stares across the street at a billboard featuring a single word in tall black letters:

OBEY

A car screeches to a halt somewhere far offscreen. Nada takes the sunglasses off and the billboard switches back to a four-color ad for a computer company called Control

Data. It reads: “We’re creating the **TRANSPARENT** computing environment.”

Nada puts the sunglasses back on and the billboard returns to its one word command: **OBEY**.

“Subliminal advertising at its finest...” I comment.

“That’s so cool!” says Yiffer.

As if he’s feeling another headache coming on, Nada takes the glasses off and pinches the bridge of his nose. He looks up at another billboard with a woman in a red bikini reclining provocatively in the blue surf of a tropical island paradise. “Come to the... Caribbean” the billboard reads. When Nada puts on the sunglasses, it transforms into a generic-looking black-and-white sign that commands: **MARRY AND REPRODUCE**.

Nada is understandably baffled by the uncanny resolving power of the sunglasses. He takes them off again. Walking down the street, he comes to a golden sign hanging above a storefront that says in elegant script: *Armisi’s Men’s Apparel*. Putting the sunglasses back on, the sign switches to stark black typography on a white background that says: **NO INDEPENDENT THOUGHT**.

“Holy fuck! No wonder I’ve never owned a suit,” says James.

“But you sure got taken in by that **MARRY AND REPRODUCE** sign,” I point out.

“In my case, it was more like: **MARRY AND THEN CHAINSAW YOUR OWN WATERBED WHEN THE BITCH ASKS YOU FOR A DIVORCE**.”

“Hard to fit all that on a sign in a nice way,” I observe.

“It could be done,” James disagrees, “but it’s too specific to be practical for mind control of the masses. Although if you were a waterbed dealer, it’d be fuckin’ great!”

Meanwhile, Nada has discovered that the command **CONSUME** lurks beneath a window sign advertising a Close Out Sale. A panorama of billboards lining a city street, seen through the sunglasses from a surreal vantage point, displays subliminal social-engineering slogans for the slow-moving traffic below that scan as: **CONSUME CONFORM SUBMIT STAY ASLEEP WATCH TV.**

Nada passes along the front of a sidewalk magazine stand. Curious, he pulls a random magazine off a shelf and looks at it through the Hoffman lenses. The by-now-familiar one-word command shows up: **OBEY**. He flips the magazine open. Every interior page has its own subliminal command: **STAY ASLEEP, OBEY, DO NOT QUESTION AUTHORITY, HONOR APATHY, NO IMAGINATION.**

When Nada looks up from the magazine, James shrieks like a panther caught on an electrified fence. A shock cut has Nada (and us) staring into the grotesque, flesh-charred, skeletal face of a bug-eyed ghoul wearing a bespoke suit and a silver-haired toupee.

“What’s your problem?” the silver-haired ghoul asks.

“Your face!” James answers for Nada, half-gagging with revulsion. The mushrooms must be making things a little too intense for him.

Nada slowly removes his sunglasses and the ghoul goes back to being a typical silver-haired businessman with a smug, condescending attitude – a somehow quintessential representative of the Reagan era’s overprivileged opportunists. He might be a money-laundering banker or

an ethically compromised corporate attorney. What's obvious is that greed has been good to him. He arcs a manicured eyebrow and repeats the question, "I said, *'What's your problem?'* "

Nada just stares at him, dumbfounded. He puts the sunglasses back on as the silver-haired creep walks over to the cash register to pay for a magazine, turning as he does so to glare at Nada with his bulbous exposed eyeballs, like some haughty walking napalm victim. The dollar bills he hands to the cashier all have the same message written across them: **THIS IS YOUR GOD.**

"Oh *shit...*" I say.

"Motherfuck..." breathes James.

The movie is getting a bit too real for both of us.

Nada departs from the magazine stand and starts walking around the city streets in a daze, leaving the sunglasses on to reveal a series of surreal black-and-white tableaux: a miniature satellite dish spinning above a traffic signal, sending out the subliminal command "*SLEEP... SLEEP... SLEEP...*"; ghoulish women mixing with human women beneath the bubble-domed hairdryers in an upscale beauty salon; a trophy wife ghoul complaining to her hired human help about an acquaintance who neglected to go to her Lamaze classes.

Shuffling into a grocery store, looking overwhelmed by the horrid truth of his situation, Nada overhears two bitchy female ghouls gossiping about a friend who served unfashionable blue-corn tortillas at a dinner party. Another ghoul listens unsympathetically to a human complaining about being passed over for a promotion at work. And then Nada zeroes in on a small television set mounted above the

checkout counter. On the screen, a smarmy ghoulish politician sits in front of a huge campaign banner with a single printed word on it. That word, of course, is: **OBEY**.

"It's a new morning in America," the Young Republican ghoulish proclaims. "Fresh. Vital. The old cynicism is gone. We have faith in our leaders. We're optimistic as to what becomes of it all. It really boils down to our ability to accept. We don't need pessimism. There are no limits...."

With an ironic chuckle, Nada says to himself: "It *figures* it would be something like this...."

"It's just about like I thought," I say, agreeing with him.

"We should show this movie in the background the next time you do that lecture on Reaganomics and the Loosh Harvesters," James suggests. "Maybe we could tour college campuses with it."

"Sure. And maybe we could throw in some fog machines and laser lights. And you could roam the aisles selling popcorn bags full of psilocybin 'shrooms before each show."

"That'd be awesome!" says James, oblivious to my sarcasm.

Back in the grocery store, a rich old lady ghoulish in a mink coat bumps into Nada from behind. "Excuse me..." she says with a heavy, put-upon sigh, as if Nada is so far beneath her in the social pecking order that an apology shouldn't even be necessary.

With his sunglasses still on, Nada looks at her and starts to lose his cool. "Y'know, you look like your head fell in the cheese dip back in 1957," he says. He goes on to tell her how ugly she looks to him through the Hoffman lenses. The old lady ghoulish responds by hissing into her gold Rolex

wristwatch (which apparently doubles as a handy, ghoulnetworked telecommunicator): "I've got one that can *see!*"

All the ghouls in the grocery store start to converge on Nada, whispering into their own wristwatches as they advance up the aisles, conveying vital information such as their location and a description of Nada's appearance. It's as if he's being stalked by a zombified horde of Young Urban Professionals.

James turns to Yiffer in the front seat and says, "You look *just like that* to me right now. Hey, Crash? Take a look at Yiffer's face and tell me what you see."

"He looks fine, James."

"It's the 'shrooms, dude," says Yiffer. "I'm not one of those yuppie Skeletor motherfuckers. If I was, I sure as shit wouldn't be delivering pizzas."

"Don't talk to me with your mouth open like that. It's freaking me out."

"Hey, take it easy, big guy..." I say, passing James a beer from the backseat. "It's just a movie. The yuppie ghouls in the real world are a lot worse."

They Live sort of devolves from that point, becoming a more-or-less standard action film - *Die Hard* meets *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* as directed by Sam Peckinpah, maybe.

Two ghouln cops show up and chase Nada down an alley. They want to know where he got the sunglasses. He punches them out and then shoots them with their own guns ("So you bastards die just like we do!" Nada gloats after shooting the first ghouln-cop in the gut). Then he steals a shotgun from their squad car and ducks into a bank, where he announces to the gathered ghouls of finance: "I

have come here to chew bubblegum and kick ass... and I'm all out of bubblegum."

A security guard ghoul fires the first shot. Misses. Then a lot of ghouls get splattered by Nada's shotgun blasts.

Yiffer suggests it might be time to scarf down the leftover pepperoni pizza in his Domino's delivery bag. All that violence has made him hungry. So we eat pizza, drink beer, and watch as Nada lumbers from one preposterous scene to the next.

He escapes from the bank in a riot of gunfire, kidnaps a lady television executive in an underground parking lot, crashes through a plate glass window in his hostage's Hollywood Hills apartment, dives into the back of a garbage truck to save his box of Hoffman lenses, and brawls with Frank Armitage for a comically long six-and-a-half minutes to get Frank to look through those same lenses (the lesson being: sometimes you have to kick a friend's ass to get him to see the truth about his situation; losing your illusions hurts).

After Frank finally gets his own glimpse of the yuppie ghouls, he teams up with Nada for more ghoul splattering exploits. They join Gilbert's underground resistance movement and end up dying in a suicide mission on the roof of a television studio known as Cable 54, but not before Nada destroys the ghouls' psychotronic signal-generator, thereby lifting the illusory curtain that protects the ghouls from being seen by humans in their true form.

In the film's final scenes, two Siskel-and-Ebert-type film critics are unmasked as ghouls (complaining that all the sex and violence on movie screens has gone too far and "filmmakers like George Romero and John Carpenter have to show some restraint!"), while a naked human woman

with nice tits is understandably chagrined to discover she's riding a horny ghoul's dick.

As the credits roll, we're left with the hope that a ghoul-purging revolution will soon follow.



"That was incredibly cool," James decrees.

"What if it's really real?" says deep-thinking Yiffer. "If aliens are in charge of the White House and stuff, it would explain a lot."

"I think *They Live* might be true on an archetypal level," I tell Yiffer, "but I doubt we can get the holographic-reality-projector on the Moon to shut down and reveal Ronald Reagan as a pain-sucking lizard demon from the outer dimensions."

"On an archetypal level? What the hell does that even mean?" asks Yiffer.

"It's a deeper level of the unconscious that communicates via symbols and ideal forms that emanate from the collective human experience - or from the One Mind, as some people call it," I explain. "Movies are a way for us to collectively dream while we're awake and explore ideas that are forbidden or derided in our officially postreligious intellectual culture - like having paranormal powers, or finding out that the world is secretly run by fascist ghouls. Sometimes, when the filmmakers have deep access to the collective unconscious, I think their films end up possessing a kind of archetypal dream-truth. They become portals between realms - 'window zones' as Charles Fort called them - that allow our collective dreaming consciousness to

cross over into our consensually shared waking reality... although sometimes I have my doubts that consensus reality is really consensual."

"Please don't start with that D-Consciousness/W-Consciousness bullshit again," James begs me. "And of course reality isn't consensual. Don't be dense. Reality's always going to fuck you over, no matter if you ask it to or not."

I have to laugh at that. He's made a good point.

"Do you really think there's a holographic-reality-projector on the Moon?" Yiffer asks me in earnest.

"You should ask our buddy Skeeze," James says. "*He'd* know."

"Skeeze claims he was abducted by a black triangle UFO and taken to the Moon," I tell Yiffer. "Do you know him?"

"*Everyone* knows that dude," Yiffer says. "You made him famous with that newspaper article of yours."

"I think he's fucking my wife," James mopes.

"He's definitely not fucking your wife," I tell James, slapping the back of his head. "Don't be dense."

"They sailed off to Mexico together on his yacht," James morbidly confides to Yiffer. "He's probably shooting a porno video of her right this minute. He's such a sleazy motherfucker. I just hope his penis isn't bigger than mine."

"You seemed pretty confident that yours was bigger than H.P. Lovecraft's," I remind him.

"Yeah, dude. At least you've got that going for you," Yiffer tries to console him.

"If Skeeze turns out to be an alien in disguise, I'm gonna be *so fucking pissed!*"

"He's not an alien," I assure James.

"How would you know?" says Yiffer. "What if, like in the movie, aliens are taking over people – only we just can't see the fuckers."

"But what if we *could* see them?" I ask. "Would it make any difference?"

"Hell yeah! Of course!"

"Why? Because they're ugly?"

"No... because they're evil! Because they want to turn us into slaves!"

"So if some evil bastard is trying to enslave people, we should just shoot to kill, is that it?"

"Right. Problem solved."

I'm starting to feel woozy and drug-addled, but at the same time I think I'm closing in on a kernel of eternal truth that a regressive part of my brain doesn't want me to know.

"Historically, that's not how it's been done," I point out. "If you look at the world from a Gnostic perspective, the ghouls have always been with us. We still need to unmask those hidden enslavers and exploiters of mankind, but they're not skuzzy-looking aliens hiding behind holograms – they're human psychopaths."

"Who told you that?" asks James, looking around.

"Think about it... you know it's true," I tell him. "Psychopaths make up only around one percent of the world's total population, but they're disproportionately concentrated in the upper echelons of high finance, the military-industrial complex, and politics. Why? Because civilization has its origins in slavery and warfare, and no one does slavery and warfare better than psychopaths."

They're intraspecies predators, hard-wired to exploit and kill their fellow human beings. In fact, a true psychopath can do it with a smile and a friendly handshake, because he doesn't have a conscience. That's how psychopaths become dictators, religious leaders, presidents, and kings. Deep down, we all know these assholes don't have the best interests of the planet at heart. But what do we do about it? Not much. In most cases, we don't even hold them accountable to the rule of law. If they're rich enough, or powerful enough, the rules don't apply."

"Like with Reagan and Bush," says Yiffer.

"Exactly. And if Reagan and Bush had ugly ghoulish faces, I *still* don't think it would make any difference. We'd just be taught, from an early age, that ghouls are superior to humans and know what's best for us."

"Man, aren't you Mister Cynical today..." James sneers.

"Well, why shouldn't I be?" I ask him. "We live in a fallen world. That should be obvious to everyone by now. A conspiracy of psychopaths has repeatedly gotten away with fucking over the other ninety-nine percent of the people on this planet. I'm talking about those traitors to all souls everywhere who figured out how to take industrial waste and sell it back to us as fluoride treatments and artificial sweeteners... who inject their language viruses into television commercials, sitcoms, lifestyle magazines, and right-wing radio talk shows to glorify and metastasize the behavior of greed-driven narcissists... who are bent on destroying sustainable agriculture with their DNA-altering doom products from DuPont and Monsanto... who pervert life-affirming sex into Orgasm Death with disco, AIDS, and Dalkon Shields... who sell crack on the streets of Harlem and South Central L.A. to finance war in Nicaragua... who

stage-manage false flag terror events to foment unwinnable wars in the Middle East and Asia... who plot to eviscerate the middle class with ever-increasing taxes and shoddy public schools because a financially-stable and well-educated populace is a threat to their continued existence... who profit from whipsawing debt-saddled governments and their citizens with interest rate manipulations, commodity price-fixing, and other acts of financial terrorism courtesy of the Fed, Goldman Sachs, J.P. Morgan, Chase, Rockefeller, Rothschild, BCCI...." I can feel my rant getting away from me, but there's no stopping now:

"Collaborators with Loosh-eaters, Archons, Insect People, treacherous grey aliens, and cattle-mutilating drakons. Ugly Spirits who've sold the ground from under unborn feet. They are the Dark Brotherhood - the sons of Belial - and they must be exposed to the Light!"

"Jesus! Are you about done?" James asks me.

"For now, I guess..." I say, a little out of breath.

"Good. Because for a while there you were starting to sound like Allen Ginsberg."

"Maybe a sequel to 'Howl' is just what the world needs," I say. I begin to declaim: *"I have seen best minds of my generation flailing about in a void of cocaine aerobics sexual excess...."*

"Yeah, yeah, yeah... I get it," says James. "Just try not to let it happen to you, okay?"



Stalin Says lights up the screen next. When Rina Rowley's name appears in the opening credits as one of a series of

Soviet avant-garde film poster knock-offs, James claps and hoots. His enthusiasm is so contagious that I join him, but Yiffer just sits there looking nonplussed.

“Is this whole dang thing in Russian?” he asks during the first scene as a lovely young mother in a night-darkened nursery coos a Russian lullaby.

“Beats the shit out of me,” says James. “We’re just here to see Rina naked – and that works in *any* language.”

As snow pelts the mullioned windows in the background, the young mother leans over a cute, dimpled blonde girl of about four or five. She tickles the girl’s dimpled cheek with a cuddly, stuffed Russian bear. A subtitle at the bottom of the screen translates the mother’s singsong words as:

“Stalin Says, *I love you*. And we love *him*, don’t we, my angel?”

The little girl nods her head. Then a window smashes and a man dives into the nursery headfirst, rolling into a ball and then exploding upward on long, springy legs. He’s garishly dressed as Uncle Sam, complete with stars-and-stripes top hat, a red bowtie, and a goatish white beard. He has a bug spray canister in his right hand with a long silvery hose spewing red-white-and-blue smoke. As he waves the hose nozzle under the young mother’s chin she chokes and faints, slumping to the floor.

The little girl screams in her bed and hides beneath the covers. Uncle Sam grabs her, bedcovers and all, and climbs back out the window, raving:

“I want YOU for the U.S. Army!”

In the next scene, the dimpled blonde girl is straightjacketed and strapped to a gurney, being prepped for electroshock therapy. (A curious detail: The stuffed bear

from the previous scene is tucked into the straightjacket near her neck, wearing a miniature straightjacket of its own.) Doctors in white lab coats crowd around her, all of them speaking English:

“Psychic driving is still an imprecise science, but in the last few years we’ve greatly improved upon Ewen Cameron’s pioneering techniques,” says one of the doctors. “We’ve found that a high dose of scopolamine combined with electroconvulsive therapy is the quickest route to depatterning.”

The little girl thrashes against the gurney straps in vain as the doctor smears a clear gel on her temples and applies electrodes. “It looks far worse than it feels,” he continues. “As soon as the current hits her, she’ll be out. It’s like hitting the restart button on a computer.”

“When her consciousness reboots, so to speak,” another doctor fills in, “we’ll be imprinting a pathway for dissociation deep within the neural network of her brain.”

The girl screams at them in Russian. A subtitle translates:

“Please don’t shock me again!”

The girl tries to bite at the fingers roughly shoving a rubber stick between her teeth so she won’t bite off her tongue when the voltage sends her into convulsions. She lets out a muted shriek.

In contrast, the doctors seem relaxed and jovial. “We’ve had some excellent results lately,” one of them says, “especially with our Beta alters. This one here would seem to have that potential. She could grow up to be a Presidential Model.”

With that, the first doctor to speak flips a switch and a surge of high voltage triggers an epilepsy-like seizure in the

girl, causing her every muscle to contort in painful spasms. From overhead, the camera zooms in tight on her face as it shivers in a terrible rictus. The whole room starts to spin and descend into an eerie darkness lit by stroboscopic flashes of colored lights. From within that darkness, an audience applauds from somewhere distant as a jocular male voice booms out:

“Tell us about your childhood....”

We fade in on Rina Rowley, sitting in a chair set on a theater stage, looking beautiful and poised in jeans and a low-cut black jersey blouse. She’s obviously the little girl from the gurney, now all grown up.

“Well, I was born in Russia,” she says with a sparkle in her eyes, “but I grew up here in New York.”

She’s being interviewed on a late night television talk show. The David Lettermanesque host sits at a desk across from her. “Some members of our audience might not know who your father is,” he says. “Can you remind us?”

“He’s Alexei Navalny Nosenko.”

“Ah, yes! The great actor and dancer who famously defected from the Soviet Union while he was on tour with the Bolshoi Ballet. We’ve had him on the show many times. But these days I’d say he’s more famous for having *you* as a daughter.”

Rina laughs, showing off pearly white teeth and her practiced ease in front of the cameras.

The host continues: “In just ten short years you’ve starred in almost thirty motion pictures. You’ve won three Golden Globes and an Oscar for your supporting role in *Miss Havisham’s Derriere*. And you’ve been voted Untouchable Magazine’s Most Beautiful Woman of the Year for three

years running now. Not bad for someone who still hasn't turned thirty." Turning serious, he asks, "How old were you when your father defected?"

"I was five," Rina answers.

"And where'd you live after that happened?"

"We lived in L.A. for a while and then my dad got divorced and we moved to New York - to the Upper West Side."

"Did you stay in touch with your mother after the divorce?"

"I don't remember her much, so... *No*. She went back to Russia and I wasn't allowed to visit her there."

"That must have been hard for you. But you were close to your father, I assume."

"Yeah. He's a great dad."

"What makes him so gosh darn great?"

"Well, um, he's just about the most compassionate man I've ever met. He's open to almost anything - and completely non-judgmental."

"I understand you used to get into quite a bit of trouble at school. Can you explain Miss Smoochy Face to me?"

"Oh... my... god...." Rina reaches for a glass of water. "I guess you did some research. I was, um, I was very sexual in kindergarten."

The audience laughs.

"And, um, my dad got a lot of calls from the principal's office. I guess I was running around kissing the boys and giving them cooties. My memory is kind of hazy about this. But some of the boys decided to stop running away. So we started making out. We'd take off all our clothes and I'd go

down and – well, that’s how I got into some serious trouble in kindergarten.”

“This is a first!” the host exclaims. “A five-year-old sex maniac! Which leads to my next question – and this really intrigues me: How old were you when you and your boyfriend started slashing each other with knives?”

“Uhm, fourteen maybe? It was when I was dating my first boyfriend. We actually lived together for two years in my dad’s house. Which was a great idea on his part, because we weren’t out sneaking around. But the cutting... it was really just because I’ve always collected weapons since I was very little, and it was one night that, um... I mean... do you really want me to get into this? Because I can.”

“By all means...” the host goads her.

“It, um, it was just that I’d started having sex – and sex didn’t feel like enough. No emotions were enough. And nothing felt real. There was always something I wanted to break out of. Or feel more of. More connected to another person, or just more honest. And one day while I was trying to find something honest, I grabbed a knife and I, uh, stabbed him... and he stabbed me back... and we had this exchange on some deeper level. And then somehow, covered in blood with my heart racing, feeling dangerous and full of life, I... um... it felt more... *honest* than whatever this sex thing was supposed to be – whatever this connection between two people was supposed to be – so I went through this period of, well... whenever I felt trapped, I would cut myself. Because it felt like I was releasing something. It felt honest. Around that same time, I also did just about every drug possible – and *that* helped, too.”

“Wow! Just wow...” says the host, shaking his head before he takes a sip of coffee. “Do you have any scars?”

"I have a lot of scars, yeah."

"Well, we have to wrap things up here, but I just want to say that you've been a fabulous guest - and a fabulous role model for all the young folks out there." It's hard to tell if he's being sarcastic. "Good luck with your new film. What's it called again?"

"*Stalin Says*," says Rina, plugging her own movie within her own movie, like an infinitely receding image in a mirrored reflection of a mirror.

In the next scene it's morning and Rina is seen taking a shower for seemingly no reason at all, unless the director is intending an ill-timed homage to Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

Yiffer says with a snort: "The way she talked on that show was so bogus. No famous actress would ever say shit like that."

"She might if she'd been through some trauma-based mind control programming as a child," I tell him. "I think that's the whole point."

"Pffft...." Yiffer blows air through his lips to indicate his scorn for that particular theory.

"Just watch and learn, you naïve little weenie," James says in a paternalistic tone. Then he turns to me and says: "A kindergarten orgasm addict who's into drugs and kinky knife play - and *now* she's a famous actress.... Gee, I wonder if the screenwriter's ever heard of Project MONARCH."

I'm just about to respond when a cordless phone rings in Rina's bathroom. She steps out of the shower to answer it, temporarily rendering me speechless with her nudity. (*There's* the reason for the shower scene....) Right after her

tense hello, a low-modulated voice distorted by electronics tells her:

“Stalin Says, *It’s time to see mother.*”

The line goes dead as Rina’s eyes glaze over in a creepy, unfocused stare. Her breasts prickle with gooseflesh and her nipples harden. Without any thought for dressing, or even drying herself off, she goes to her closet and starts packing a Louis Vuitton travel bag.

When we next see Rina, she’s at a Delta Air Lines counter booking a flight to Moscow. Tragically (from our point of view, at least), she’s back to wearing clothes.

Two black-suited goons in mirrored sunglasses greet her at the Sheremetyevo International Airport. Rina knows them as Cookie and Shadow. Apparently they’ve met before. They escort her to a black Rolls-Royce Phantom IV and drive her out to a magnificent country estate. A long, cobblestone driveway leads up to an elegant limestone mansion – more of a castle, really – which must have been owned by countless generations of Russian aristocrats. Somehow, it seems to have survived the Bolshevik Revolution without a scratch. Big Vlad Nabokov would have admired the hell out of it.

A liveried footman opens the back door of the Rolls and Rina gets out. She dashes up the limestone steps to embrace her mother – the same woman we glimpsed in the film’s opening scene, now twenty-five years older. Splendidly dressed in pearls and a beaded gown, she leads Rina on a quick tour through the mansion as they catch up on each other’s lives – both of them speaking fluent Russian (with translated subtitles running across the bottom of the screen). It soon becomes apparent that they’ve been seeing each other quite often. For some reason, when the talk

show host asked Rina if she'd stayed in touch with her mother, she chose to lie.

Later, at a dinner party in the mansion attended by many distinguished-looking guests, Rina raises a glass of champagne and toasts her mother as "My Mama, Tzarina of the Swallows."

Whatever *that* means....

When Rina returns to her seat, she staggers and catches herself on the back of the chair, as if she's feeling woozy. Her vision tilts and blurs as she scans the long table, taking in all the chattering guests seated in front of sparkling crystal stemware and fine china. Then, with a lewd trombone blast, Uncle Sam bounds into the room bearing an antique silver chafing dish with a large, ornate lid. He sets the dish in front of Rina and whisks away the lid to reveal a pile of red-white-and-blue hot dogs lit by Fourth of July sparklers.

Rina looks like she's about to become violently ill. Her mother puts a hand on her shoulder to steady her. "We decided you needed a little tune-up," she says in flawless English. "You looked like you were coming unglued on that talk show the other night. Uncle Sam is here to help."



The other assembled guests seem to take no notice of Uncle Sam, even though his grin stretches to his sideburns and he's swinging his weirdly elongated star-spangled sleeves in a rhythmic cha-cha, chanting "*Yankee da! Russia nyet!*" like an absolute madman. Rina's mother raises her hands to eye-level and claps them twice, sharply.

"Stalin Says, *Be gone!*" she commands.

Rina passes out.

"This movie is *so... whacked...*" Yiffer says with genuine admiration.

The intro to a song by The Smiths ("How Soon Is Now?") comes up loud on the soundtrack. Rina is back in a straightjacket, strapped to a gurney rolling through the grimy corridors of an underground medical facility. Flashbacks to Rina as a dimpled five-year-old in similar circumstances are superimposed over the montage that follows: a horrifying catalog of mind control techniques inflicted on both Rinas as they drift in and out of consciousness.

Without knowing what's supposed to be real and what's imagined or hallucinated, we see Rina sleeping naked in windowless room lit by blacklights. She's connected to an intravenous drip bag that keeps her in a chemical coma while a reel-to-reel tape deck repeats commands into the headphones strapped to her ears ("Stalin Says, *Go Delta...*" "Stalin Says, *Go Beta...*"). Two sinister white-gloved hands appear in the inky darkness just above her breasts, swimming through the air and describing arabesques like shadow figures in a Balinese puppet show. One of the hands picks up a syringe and brutally stabs its large needle through Rina's sternum, injecting a shot of noradrenaline

straight into her heart that jolts her awake like a startled animal. She sits up and finds herself staring into headlights that seem about to run her over. But then the headlights resolve into the single bright light of a movie projector.

Straightjacketed and strapped to a gurney again, Rina is rolled down the center aisle of a small movie theater with the clear plastic bag for the IV drip hanging from a hooked pole above her head. Two orderlies tip the gurney upright so that Rina stands facing the screen. The orderlies then attach a halo of brain-monitoring equipment to her head, switch out the IV bag for another, and inject the contents of a syringe into the ported cannula tapped into a vein on her left wrist. The new chemical cocktail brings an instant, blissed-out smile to Rina's lips. Backlit doctors watching from the movie theater's projection booth speak to each other in subdued tones as the work proceeds:

"Very soon, our subject will be experiencing a chemical wave of pleasure so intense that a mere orgasm, in comparison, will seem like the passing of a cold turd. We'll be entraining her neuroanatomy to associate that extreme pleasure with images of pornography and gore. Ultimately, the goal is to get her to conflate sex with violence in such a way that she becomes the perfect sleeper agent, willing to fuck or kill for her country on command."

"So you're saying she'll kill just to experience pleasure?"

"In part. Her alternate personalities have been trained to perform different tasks, but they all experience the same pleasure when those tasks are carried out to completion. Her Delta alter is the trained assassin; only that alter experiences pleasure from acts of homicide or violence."

"Which alter are we seeing now?"

“Her Beta alter – trained in the art of seduction for purposes of espionage. Such women are known as ‘swallows’ in the intelligence community. She’s just about ready for her refresher course. Watch.”

We watch from behind Rina’s neckline as she stares at the movie screen filling our movie screen. Images of pornography and violence flit by in such rapid succession that we can’t take them all in. But then the images dissolve and we transition to a scene set inside an elementary school classroom. Five-year-old Rina enters wearing a white communion dress, followed by a pack of boys dressed all in white: white blazers, white shorts, white shoes, white school caps. Uncle Sam stands at the front of the classroom beside a desk that’s an exact replica of the talk show host’s desk from Rina’s last night in America. With a stick of chalk in hand, he draws an enormous, balloon-like cartoon penis spurting semen on the blackboard behind him. In a cartoon speech bubble just above it, Uncle Sam writes: “LET’S ALL DIVE IN TO SOME QUIVERING QUINN!”

Little Rina looks appalled, but the boys respond by gleefully stripping down to their white underpants.

The scene shifts to adult Rina standing in the same classroom wearing an oversized white communion dress. She’s surrounded by a pack of Serbian midgets in diapers. They pull her to the floor and serially rape her, but she doesn’t seem to mind. While the midgets swarm over Rina shouting lusty imprecations, her white communion dress starts to grow fur. She’s soon encased in a fuzzy crotchless bear costume of the sort worn by plushophiles – people who enjoy having sex in fuzzy animal costumes. Rina’s face pokes out from a round elastic hole where the bear’s face

should have been. She now has black, drawn-on whiskers radiating from both sides of her nose.

Meanwhile, the Serbian midgets are bearing down on Rina's vagina with a modified orange Husqvarna chainsaw featuring a chain of upright human tongues in place of its cutting teeth. "Do Not Attempt To Stop Spinning Blade With Hands or Genitals" a caution sticker on the side of the chainsaw reads. Paying no heed to that warning, the midgets subject Rina's clit to the chainsaw's mechanical licks. She writhes in twitchy ecstasy.

Soon the midgets drag forth a new implement of coital conquest: the Impertinent Mauve Thunderpump. It's a raunchy work of wonder featuring an enormous mauve dildo powered by a Briggs and Stratton two-stroke hydraulic pump equipped with a novel "suck-o-matic" valve for faster tool retraction. The midgets aim the massive mauve dong at Rina's beckoning slit. It starts pistoning in and out of her with increasing frequency on its greasy chrome rod.

Rina sighs and spreads her bear-suited legs wider. The tongue-chainsaw licks faster. The Thunderpump pumps harder. Sexual tension builds. And *builds*. Until, finally - with a violent convulsion - Rina has one of the most powerful orgasms in cinematic history. The whole group of Serbian midgets staggers backward, clutching at their eyes as though blinded, while an endless squirting gush of female ejaculation spatters the camera lens and renders the scene blurry with drips and streaks of Rina's precious bodily fluids.

"Holy moly!" groans James. "I think I just jizzed in my pants!"

"Me too," Yiffer confesses with far more sincerity.

"I guess Rina forgot to mention that tongue-chainsaw scene during Nora's interview," I say.

"Was that the kind of chainsaw that tore up your waterbed?" Yiffer asks James.

"Dude, if I had *that* chainsaw, I'd still be married."

Up on the screen, one of the doctors in the projection booth leans forward to speak into a microphone. "Stalin Says, *Go Delta...*" he commands, his voice amplified by the movie theater's P.A. system. Rina is still standing in the theater's center aisle, straightjacketed to the upright gurney. She undergoes a visible shift in demeanor as the two orderlies reappear and inject the contents of a fresh syringe into the cannula dangling from her wrist. Her blissed-out smile returns.

The doctors in the projection booth confer again. The lead doctor says: "The subject's Delta alter has been trained since the age of five in the martial arts and the use of weaponry. There's nothing living on Earth she can't kill, if we decide to put her up to it. The implanted post-hypnotic trigger sequence, which you just heard, is all it takes to activate her. After that, we only have to tell her who to assassinate and when, and she goes and does it. No questions asked."

"She has no qualms about killing?"

"None whatsoever."

On the soundtrack, we hear The Smith's "How Soon Is Now?" fading out as a radio jock from a seventies rock station cuts in to announce: "Animal rights activists are up in arms over a recent AP news story about North Koreans eating dogs to beat the heat this summer. It seems they share a cultural belief that dog flesh has special cooling

properties. How crazy is that? I mean, what are they thinking? 'Boy, it sure is hot out today... let's go eat a puppy!'

Again, we watch from behind Rina's neckline as she stares at another round of porn and gore flickering on the movie screen with hypnotic rapidity.

"Next up, Cliff Richard's classic: 'Devil Woman'..." says the radio jock, upbeat and smarmy. The intro to that song comes up loud on the soundtrack.

The rapid cycling of images dissolves to a forest of evergreens. During the transition, Rina steps out of the forest to stand at the edge of a steep grassy riverbank. It looks like an ideal spot for fly-fishing. The river below her is wide, but not deep, with stones and boulders churning the current to a white froth in places. In other places, the river is so calm that we can see clear to its sandy bottom. In one such place, a gargantuan black fish drifts in the shallow water.

The fish seems ominously surreal in this setting. Half of its slimy black back arcs above the waterline while its sagging dorsal fin flaps like a huge mildewed Chinese paper fan. It looks like an out-of-place deep-sea creature with its mouthful of curving fangs and its incredible length and girth - over thirty feet from the weird, fern-like tentacles drooping from its snout to the tip of its flopping forked tail.

There's a treble-hooked boat anchor attached to a coil of marine rope at Rina's feet. She picks up the anchor and twirls it like a lasso above her head. Then she hurls it at the leviathan. Two of the anchor's tines puncture the fish's flank near its chuffing gill slit. Rina hops into an Army surplus Jeep and hauls the enraged, thrashing fish out of the river by the rope tied to the Jeep's rear bumper. She speeds up a

grassy incline to a meadow where dozens of red picnic tables have been set up beneath red-and-white striped tent awnings. A birchbark sign at the front of the encampment advertises: **BURLY BOB'S BAR-B-QUE.**

As Rina slams on the brakes, a troop of Serbian midgets in full military regalia swarms the monster fish and slices it into bloody hunks with bayonets. With grim relish, the midgets slap the fatty hunks of fish flesh onto industrial-sized charcoal grills. Oily blue smoke spirals up into the air to drift in low clouds across the picnic grounds. The mood is festive. Housewives in gingham dresses with star-spangled aprons serve up thick slices of apple pie on paper plates. It's like a Fourth of July celebration in Anytown, USA.

Then a barrage of artillery turns the scene into chaos.

Suddenly, it's like D-Day at Omaha Beach during the Allied invasion of Normandy. Rina shoulders a bazooka and starts blasting away at her unseen attackers. She instantly sees results: her bazooka shell slams into a sandbagged machine gun nest full of American soldiers. One soldier has his legs blown off to pink pulped stumps. Another sits patting what should have been his face - now just a shredded nest of skinflaps dangling from his raw, flayed skull. The gruesome carnage doesn't seem to bother Rina, but it freaks the fuck out of us.

"Gross!" Yiffer blurts out. He actually gags a little.

"I can't watch this," says James, turning his head. "Normally I'd be into it, but on 'shrooms... no thanks."

Another shrapnel-blasted soldier picks up his own severed arm and carries it off like a dog slinking home with a stolen bone.

This is the world we live in... I think to myself. Boys and girls really do get shipped off to die in these hideous ways. And why? To what end? Why can't we stop our species' suicidal fuck-you slaughter?

I feel like I've just borne witness to some of the worst perversions mankind has to offer. I'm starting to wonder if seeing such images leaves behind mental scars from which our psyches never fully recover. What's been seen cannot be unseen. But at the same time, those images seem to convey some grim truths about the human condition – a nightmare from which we'll never awaken unless we can open our eyes to its horrors and work to change things for the better.

There's more:

After dispatching dozens of soldiers with bazooka blasts and machine gun fire, Rina steps too close to a concussion grenade that blows off her clothes and knocks her unconscious. When she wakes up she finds herself naked, tied to a dentist's chair in a room full of Serbian midgets wearing diapers again. Doctors in white lab coats observe her from behind a one-way mirror, talking among themselves:

"Why should she kill American soldiers when all her training in this facility has been accomplished using the English language?" one of the doctors asks his colleagues.

"She must kill American soldiers because one day she'll be asked to assassinate American leaders," another doctor explains. "Since her front alter, or default personality, self-identifies as an actress raised in America, we thought it wise to have her other alters identify as Americans as well. That way, if she should ever start to recall her programming, she'll believe the Americans did it to her."

Another doctor adds: "We can't have her thinking Mother Russia would commit such atrocities against her own children. Only her Alpha alter self-identifies as Russian, and that alter - her mother's dutiful daughter - has no awareness of the others."

A large brown bear pads into the room on the other side of the one-way mirror. The Serbian midgets cower from it against a far wall. One of the observing doctors flicks the switch on a hand-held microphone and commands: "Stalin Says, *Go THETA...*" We can hear the echo of that command in the room where Rina sits tied to the dentist's chair, going through another quick round of shapeshifting in demeanor and body language while the bear sniffs at her ankles.

"And yet you insist on using the command 'Stalin Says' as a trigger mechanism," the first doctor to speak points out.

"You could argue that the Americans would want to keep Stalin's political missteps at the forefront of her multiple consciousnesses," another doctor answers, "but truly, there's no need for absolute logical consistency. The American actress, Rina Rowley, is a sleeper agent controlled via post-hypnotic suggestion by her English-speaking handlers at *Spetsgruppа Vympel* in the Soviet Union. If it all goes to shit someday, we just want the option of blaming it on the CIA and their MKULTRA program."

The bear stands to its full, fearsome height in front of Rina, sporting an equally fearsome erection. Rina cries out: "Please! Someone untie me!"

The midgets make no move to help her.

"It was the CIA's discovery, after all, that children subjected to extreme forms of trauma tend to dissociate and spontaneously create multiple personalities," the same

doctor explains. "When Miss Rowley here dissociated as a young girl, she always took comfort in the little stuffed bear her mother gave her right before her traumas began. We're about to break her of that habit."

"Why would you want to do that?" the first doctor asks as the bear clambers up onto the dentist's chair and proceeds to rape Rina in the background.

"Extreme trauma inspires our subjects to break through to another level of reality in order to escape the hell of the one they're in. In our work we've found that if the trauma is great enough our subjects will sometimes acquire astral powers from the Other Side and bring them down into matter. We can then compartmentalize those paranormal powers by tasking them to hypnotically-created alters called *THETAs*."

The bear seems to be losing interest. One of the midgets tries to arouse it by prodding its engorged member with a stick. That particular midget gets eaten for his impudence. While the midget squawks and gurgles amid the crunching of bones, Rina is left languishing in the dentist's chair, ravished.

"She hardly got raped by that bear at all!" James complains. "What a rip-off!"

"I didn't know you were such a big fan of bear porn," I say.

"I've been looking forward to seeing that hot bear-on-Rina *acción* ever since she told us about it. It was something to live for! But man, what a let down.... I'll bet that grizzly's dick wasn't even real."

"It looked like a cheap rubber strap-on!" I concur, humoring him.

“At least she was wearing a bear suit while she got boned by that Impertinent Mauve Thunderpumper,” Yiffer points out.

“Yeah, that was pretty good...” James admits, checking the inseam near his crotch for signs of dampness.

In the next scene, Rina and her mother are enjoying a picnic lunch on Moneron Island. In the grass just beyond their red-and-white checkered picnic blanket, a shoulder-mounted missile launcher lays preloaded with a FIM-92B Stinger missile. The two women carry on, sipping champagne and eating cucumber sandwiches, as if the missile launcher doesn’t exist at all.

“You should find yourself a good man,” Rina’s mother says to her, speaking Russian again (with translated subtitles). “I know a handsome young Swede who might be just right for you. He works in America for the Council on Foreign Relations.”

“It’s hard for me to keep a boyfriend, Mama,” Rina says, also speaking Russian. “I travel too much. And besides, to be a successful actress you have to meet many powerful men without your clothes. Boyfriends never like that.”

“This one won’t mind. There’s not a jealous bone in his big-boned body. He just got out of a long relationship with the pop singer, Grace Jones.”

“Big-boned, you say?”

“Yes, massive. He’s over two meters tall – and he’s visiting Moscow this summer. I think you should meet him.” Rina’s mother pats her daughter’s hand. “You have more than enough money now. You should think about starting a family.”

“You know I can’t get pregnant.”

“Yes, and I’m very sorry about that. Soviet gynecologists are scum. But you could adopt. With your resources, you could give Mia Farrow a run for her money.”

“How many little rabbits does she have now?”

“She was up to nine at last count. It’s good PR for her.”

“That’s a lot of shitty diapers to change.”

“I believe she has servants do the child-rearing for her. You could do the same.”

“But why would I want to?”

“As I said, dear, public relations.... That, and some judicious charity work, and you might find doors opening for you in the American citadels of politics and high finance. That would make me very proud.”

“I want you to be proud, Mama,” Rina says. “I love you so much.”

“And I love *you*, my angel. As does Stalin. And now, Stalin Says, *Go Delta*.”

Rina undergoes a subtle bodily shift. Then she stands upright, scanning the horizon for enemies. Her mother casually points to a distant Korean Air Lines 747 streaking across the blue sky.

“See that jet?” she says in English. “It’s violating Soviet airspace.”

Rina expertly shoulders the missile launcher and launches the FIM-92B Stinger at her mother’s designated target. The commercial airliner bursts open like a piñata, scattering streamers of sheet metal and jettisoned air travelers across the Sea of Japan.

From this point, the movie veers off into a farcical love story: something like *Barbarella* meets *Doctor Zhivago*.

Rina meets and seduces Dolph Lundgren – the aforementioned handsome Swede. They spend time together in the theaters and cafes of Moscow while Rina covertly goes about her business of assassinating diplomats and stealing state secrets. Eventually, they decide to marry and adopt children. They become world-famous for traveling to war-torn countries and bringing back babies. (“Rina Rowley is coming!” an orphanage director in Uganda shouts to her assembled charges – a pathetic assortment of starving, belly-bloated toddlers in spanking new white diapers. As Rina and Dolph drive toward them from across the dusty savannah in an open cockpit Jeep, the director shouts, “Time to shine!” and the children break into a joyous African dance number that would have made Busby Berkeley proud.)

Rina becomes a UN Goodwill Ambassador and is later honored for her philanthropic work by being invited to join the Council on Foreign Relations – thanks to her husband’s nomination – which turns out to have been her mother’s true goal all along. The CFR has been plotting to deal an economic deathblow to Communism and then plunder the Soviet Union’s natural resources under the banner of free market capitalism. Rina’s handlers believe the plot can be stopped if Rina’s Delta alter can detonate a Gucci-bag-sized neutron bomb during the CFR’s next meeting at the Harold Pratt House in New York City. (Dolph gets a clue that something’s up when he overhears Rina’s mother commanding her to “decapitate the head of the Octopus.”)

The U.S. Secretary of Defense is scheduled to address the upcoming CFR meeting, so security is tight. Rina shimmies through some *Mission: Impossible*-style situations to smuggle the bomb inside, taking out a few security guards

with blow darts tipped with a fast-acting neurotoxin. Once she's safely ensconced in the auditorium's front row between Dolph and David Rockefeller (the cadaverous seventy-three-year-old patriarch of the Rockefeller family), Rina starts the bomb's timer and places it under her seat. Dolph sees what she's doing and realizes that everyone inside the building will die - including his beloved wife - unless he does something to stop it.

Dolph leans over and kisses Rina with a lot of intriguing tongue action. "I can't let you do this," he says to her. He grabs the Gucci bag and runs up the aisle with the bomb inside it, carrying it like a football. Rina tries to catch him, but he's too quick for her. She whips out her concealed blow dart tube and levels it at Dolph's broad back, but she can't bring herself to blow the neurotoxin-tipped dart at him. Her Delta programming has fritzed out from the overwhelming power of her husband's love.

As the CFR meeting descends into chaos, Dolph crashes through a window of the Harold Pratt House and hails a taxi. He yanks the driver into the street and gets behind the wheel, driving like a maniac toward the Queensboro Bridge. Several semi-obligatory car crashes follow in his wake. Somehow he makes it to the bridge, driving against traffic. The bomb's timer is counting down, almost to zero. Once he's out over the East River, Dolph crosses lanes behind a convenient tow truck with its ramp down, which he then uses to flip the speeding taxi over the guardrail and into the river. The taxi sinks, with Dolph still inside it. Then the neutron bomb detonates underwater, making the East River even more unsafe to swim in than it was already.

The movie ends with Rina and her twenty-three adopted children attending Dolph's funeral. Rina's mother stands

next to her as David Rockefeller delivers the eulogy. She leans over and whispers to Rina, “*Stalin Says, Go Beta...*” while pointing a finger at Rockefeller. Rina responds with a sexy grin.

“David Rockefeller,” she whispers, “you’re about to get fucked.”



On the drive back to Cambria, we share some quibbles about the film’s ending. Why was Rina allowed to attend her husband’s funeral right after she tried to blow up the Council on Foreign Relations? Wouldn’t she be locked up? (“Maybe she made bail,” Yiffer lamely suggests.) And wouldn’t a septuagenarian billionaire like David Rockefeller be immune to Rina’s charms – especially considering that she had so recently, in James’ turn of phrase, “tried to turn him into Hiroshima bacon bits”? All Hollywood endings are inherently ridiculous, we conclude, but this one perhaps more so than others.

We lapse into silence as we pass through Morro Bay, where the black waves of the starlit sea become visible out the windows to our left. It’s late, we’re tired, and the movies have given us a lot to think about. I’ve started to wonder if *Stalin Says* was a limited hangout for Project MONARCH. But if the CIA was up to its usual Operation Mockingbird propaganda tactics, using *Stalin Says* to disinform and misdirect the American public with shiny bits of truth wrapped in a skein of lies, then why did the KGB cooperate with the filmmakers while they were shooting on location in Moscow? Did the KGB mean to insinuate that they had a

secret *Spetsnaz* program for creating sleeper agents? And if so, was the CIA now collectively shitting bricks?

I'll likely never learn the answers to those questions, but the fact that I would even think to ask them makes me realize just how far down the rabbit hole of deep politics I've already gone. Maybe the world has always been implacably bleak and the dawning of that realization is what makes maturity so frightening. Or maybe Lovecraft had it right and the true horror lies in perceiving our individual frailty and insignificance within a predominantly evil cosmic scheme.

Finding those thoughts too depressing, I try to distract my mind with something else. The car's radio is tuned to KOTR. Lady Tie-Dye comes on the air to introduce The Human League's recent hit, "Human." Yiffer turns it up and quietly, absent-mindedly, starts to sing along:

*I'm only human
Of flesh and blood I'm made
Human
Born to make mistakes....*

I'm only a half-dozen years older, but I can already feel myself pulling away from Yiffer's simpler, yet more meaning-laden connection to the world. There was a time when a song like "Human" would have set up an emotional resonance in me, but now it just seems banal. Losing that ability to find meaning in trivial pop songs makes me sad, in the same way that almost all nostalgic reveries contain a hint of sadness for things lost.

I think back to a similar night, heading home from a drive-in with James and our friends Twinker, D.H., and Skip, all of

us crammed into the cab of Hideous Nakamatsu's truck singing along to Vanilla Fudge's woozy version of the Supremes classic, "You Keep Me Hangin' On." It was a night we didn't want to end. It felt great to be young and fucked-up, without a care for the world's larger concerns. All that seemed to matter was our friendship - and that was enough.

But now three of those friends are dead - Twinker, D.H., and Skip - and life's meaning isn't so easy for me to discern these days. The world is the same, but I'm different. Like some wised up cultural demonologist, I see deeper now into reality's manifest disguises and the world's evils (or so I believe), but in the process I've been losing the sense that my own existence matters. With every new hard truth, with each new revelation, I feel myself receding further and further toward meaninglessness.

And yet I persist. To do otherwise would seem like spiritual cowardice - a wussing out of the soul. Sometimes I feel like a samsaric detective trying to solve the biggest mystery of them all:

What's the point of being human?

I'll admit it's foolish to expect to find answers. Sometimes I ask myself why I even bother. Most souls, it seems, just want to be entertained.

OBE-188: THE ARCHON AS AUTEUR

Unbeknownst to most film critics, Archons have been the true auteurs of many well-known movies.

Every movie has an egregore affiliated with it, an egregore that arises from the collaborative efforts of screenwriters, directors, producers, actors, agents, DPs, best boys, grips – basically, anyone who shares the goal of getting the movie made. That amounts to a lot of shared psychic energy in most cases, resulting in a strong, independent-minded egregore – a movie’s Team Spirit, in the most literal sense of that term. But often an unseen Archon is the movie’s original source of inspiration and its chief overseer through every step of production, from the first page of its screenplay to its final screening. In such cases, the Archon – rather than the movie’s human collaborators – ends up reaping the most from the Loosh harvest of the movie’s audience.

Oh, wait... did we forget to mention that movie egregores can be used for Loosh harvesting? Shit! They can! (Egregores attached to spiritually corrupt books, plays, and particularly annoying pop songs can do the same on a lesser scale; cf. the complete works of Clive Barker, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and Madonna, etc.) That’s why so many producers, writers, and directors count themselves among the members of the Dark Brotherhood. They’re willing to submit to the Archons’ transdimensionally-dictated cinematic plans and execute them in the physical world –

and since Archons operate outside of linear time, movies can be planned as Operation Mockingbird-style propaganda that will impact future real-world events. For those reasons and more, the Dark Brotherhood pretty much has a lock on Hollywood.

As Gordon would say, "Think about it... you know it's true."

When it comes to most common egregores - egregores associated with a marriage, a family, a community, a volunteer fire department, or whatever - the Loosh that you contribute during your physical incarnation becomes available to you when you cross over to your astral incarnation, when you'll need it most. In that sense, an egregore acts like a bank or credit union, as we've already discussed. That's not altogether true of a movie egregore, however. Granted, it works that way for the people who make the movie and distribute it - but it doesn't work that way for the movie's intended audience.

For the two hours or so that an audience watches a movie, that movie's egregore has the privilege of sucking up as much Loosh from its audience as the movie can muster. Since most movies are Dark Brotherhood productions, the kind of Loosh those movies try to induce is the kind that Archons like the most: Loosh produced by human fear and suffering.

How does this work? Brain researchers will tell you that after watching about thirty minutes of a movie or television show, your consciousness enters a hypnoidal twilight state and stops distinguishing between Self and Other. You start to live what's on the screen - which puts you in an ideal state to feed an egregore.

There's no end to the emotional turmoil you can put yourself through while watching a movie. You can be both the sociopathic boat captain getting eaten alive by a great white shark and the epicene Jedi warrior whacking Daddy with a light saber. You'll gladly participate in mafia hits, lake monster maulings, LSD freak-outs, the preteen prostitution of Jodie Foster, kamikaze strikes on Pearl Harbor, epic earthquakes (in Sensurround!), botched Moon landings, black masses, death by piranha nibbling, mid-air biplane collisions, Nazi face meltings, zombified Jane Austen adaptations, gratuitous vomiting, ritual disembowlings, Indian massacres, cowboy homoeroticism, transgender hot tub orgies, the reckless abandonment of Audrey Hepburn's sopping wet pussycat... you name it!

You might think you're having a great time as all that emotional crap boils through you, but all the while you're being milked by an egregore for artificially induced Loosh - which is kind of a bummer. That's why you'll often leave a movie feeling empty or dispirited, kind of like Gordon felt at the end of Stalin Says. Getting milked for Loosh with a negative spin to it (as opposed to love-spun Loosh) isn't a good feeling.

We're not saying you should stop watching movies. You might, however, want to become more aware of how entertainment impacts your psyche. If a movie is making you feel anxious or depressed, try shaking free of its grip by reminding yourself that it's only a movie. Later, you can graduate to saying "It's only life..." when some life situation is making you feel intense negative emotions - because really, each lifetime is like a movie when viewed from the perspective of your immortal spirit. Any good samsaric detective should know that a human life filled

with negativity is a joyless illusion. A life filled with Love and Light is also an illusion, but somewhat less so because it's closer to the Divine Source, which is the only true reality.

With that in mind, here are two simple suggestions that can immediately improve the illusory quality of your life:

1.) Watch fewer movies - especially zombie apocalypse sagas, anything with H.R. Giger-designed aliens in it, and lesbian vampire porn.

2.) Get yourself a pet - like Audrey Hepburn did at the end of Breakfast at Tiffany's. (Although we tend to favor dogs over cats. All dogs go to heaven. But cats? Not so much....)

MARRSDENS AT MIDNIGHT

After Yiffer drops us off in front of my house and heads home, James and I trudge up the long, steep staircase without exchanging a word. We're all talked out, ready to call it a night.

Once we get inside, James tells me he wouldn't mind taking a shower before he climbs into the hammock – he's "feeling sticky" – so I find him an extra towel and leave him to his ablutions.

Meanwhile, I strip down to my boxer shorts beside the redwood bed and then slide under the goose down comforter. Within minutes, I tumble into a deep, dream-plagued sleep.

I find myself in a dark room with indigo walls and a dirty linoleum floor swarming with poisonous spiders – nasty little grey things with jagged black stripes along their abdomens. The spiders are trying to bite me, crawling up my shins, leaping onto my neck. Their long, spiny legs prick my skin like digging needles. I keep brushing them off me, stomping on them with my feet, but there seems to be no end to them.

Feeling anxious and depressed, I think to myself that I'd rather be doing something else – *anything* else. With that thought, I navigate back to wakefulness.

I sit up in bed. There's no telling how long I've been asleep. The cabin is pitch-dark. I'm about to reach for my

watch on the bedside table when I notice something moving on the other side of the french doors that open onto the deck.

An aquamarine phantom is peering in at me through the glass. Its eyes and mouth, just pools of shadows at first, soon resolve into the face of a tall, shadowy man wearing a bowler hat and an undertaker's black suit. I try to shout, but I can't find my voice. I'm almost paralyzed with terror because the shadowy man's face is crawling with something that looks like luminous blue fireflies.

Finally, the repressed shout tears loose from my throat: "GET OUT OF HERE! LEAVE US ALONE!" I roar. My heart feels like it's hammering on the outside of my chest, trying to get back in.

In an instant, the cabin's interior is flooded with light and the shadowy man disappears in its glare. James has flung open the door to the bathroom back by the kitchen. He dashes out of it wearing only a towel, shouting, "*What's going on?!?*"

As I pull on my pants, I try to explain what I've just seen, but I'm too rattled to make much sense. James tries to calm me down by saying, "It must have been a nightmare..." but I'm having none of that. The vision seemed perfectly real. In fact, I'm so convinced of its authenticity that I put on all my clothes and go to the kitchen to get the biggest knife I can find.

James meekly explains that his towel had caught on the edge of the toilet tank lid as he was drying off from the shower and the lid fell to the floor, where it broke in half with a loud crack. A split-second later, he heard me shouting. The crack must have woken me up in the middle

of REM sleep, he theorizes, and I'd continued dreaming with my eyes wide open.

"D-Consciousness invades W-Consciousness, remember?" he says, throwing my own theories about dreaming and waking consciousness right back in my face.

I tell him to put on his clothes and help me check the decks outdoors, anyway. I'm starting to accept the idea that I might have been dreaming, but I still need to be sure that shadowy men with blue firefly faces aren't roaming around outside our house.

James gets his clothes on and reluctantly goes out into the cold night to look around with me. There's nothing out there, of course. We go back inside and I put Leonard Cohen's *I'm Your Man* on the stereo. I'm too wired to sleep - and James says he should stay on "radio time" anyway, since his DJ shift from 11 P.M. to 8 A.M. will be starting up again tomorrow night - so we sit down on the couch to talk.

"Maybe the blue man really *was* just a hypnopompic hallucination," I grudgingly concede. "Or maybe a flashback from the mushrooms we took earlier."

"Sure it was. What else could it be?" James asks me.

"My first thought? Men in Black on the warpath because of my UFO article in the *Insurrectionist*."

"That's just crazy talk," says James, but his facial expression tells me something different. He's looking a bit spooked. After all, if his Uncle Lloyd is to be believed, he and James had been abducted by Men in Black right after I went crashing over the cliff in Lloyd's Bentley five years ago.

"What happened when you and Lloyd got kidnapped by the Men in Black on the cliff that day?" I ask James.

He's just about to answer when we both see someone – or *something* – lurch with a heavy tread past the leaded glass panes in the cabin's front door.

"What the hell was that?" James asks me.

Whatever it was, it's headed toward the cabin's front deck.

Without saying another word, James runs over and grabs the fireplace poker by the wood-burning stove while I snatch up my kitchen knife again.

With a nod, James goes out the front door while I simultaneously go out the french doors onto the deck. Whatever it is that we just saw lurching past the front door, it will be trapped between us on a deck and a narrow walkway nine-stories above the ground.

This time it's no aquamarine phantom. It's something nameless, an unidentifiable *presence* oozing menace. It stands in the darkest part of the walkway – a huge, Sasquatch-shaped mass waving two thick tentacles as if in supplication to the distant stars, like some prayerful mutant octopus. Cautiously, James and I approach the loathsome creature with our respective weapons raised. Then, as our eyes adjust to the dim light, the shadows dispel to reveal a fat man in a black cashmere overcoat: James' Uncle Lloyd.

Speak of the devil!

"What a lovely, *lovely* place you have here, Gordon," Lloyd says as he turns toward me, making no mention of the knife in my hand, still poised to stab the smile right off his fat face.

"Lloyd! What the fuck!" says James. "You scared the crap out of us!"

As James lowers the fireplace poker, Lloyd wraps a massive arm across his nephew's shoulders and pulls him into a crushing bear hug. "I'll admit it's somewhat late for a visit," he says, "but my time here is short. I would've called first, but Gordon's phone number happens to be unlisted."

"Like that's ever stopped you before..." James scoffs.

"It's good to see you after all these years, Lloyd," I say, recovering from my initial shock. I shake his cold, meaty hand. "Do you want to come inside where it's warmer?"

"I'd be delighted!"

As we go in through the french doors, I ask Lloyd if I can get him something to drink.

"I've brought champagne," he says, producing a bottle of vintage Dom Pérignon from the interior of his massive overcoat. He pops the cork while I get some glasses from the kitchen.

Lloyd hasn't changed much from my memories of him five years earlier. He's still morbidly obese (but a sharp dresser). He has the same squinty eyes and beet red cheeks (animated by an extraordinary intelligence and jovial human warmth). His toupee seems to be the only thing different about him. The upgraded version that he wears now is shorter in length, with silvery-grey highlights that seem better suited to him. He looks older, but slightly more dignified, like an overfed international banker - or Richard Gere's bloated big brother.

After the champagne is poured, we all three raise our glasses. "It's easy to love humanity in the abstract," Lloyd toasts. "It's much harder, I've found, to love people on an individual basis... but in my present company, it's no trouble at all. *Cin cin!*"

"So I take it you've been running into a lot of, uhm, *assholes* out there..." I say to Lloyd after we drink.

"I have," Lloyd confirms. "Politicians and their financiers, for the most part. Privileged elitist pricks of such low cunning that it's hard not to wish they'd all been suffocated in their dormitory beds at Yale, or hanged from Longfellow Bridge upon their graduation from Harvard Business School."

"Does that bad attitude of yours have something to do with your new buddies in the Collins Elite?" James asks him.

"Yes and no." Lloyd smirks and then starts to explain as we all sit down around the knotty pine coffee table: "First, you have to understand that the name 'the Collins Elite' originated as a sort of joke. Not long after the CIA was chartered in 1947, the Pentagon started funding a covert think-tank group to look into UFOs. They assembled a team, selecting key members from the intelligence divisions of the Army, Navy, and Air Force. This wasn't anything like the more public investigations we've all heard about – Project Blue Book and the Condon Report and so forth – which were basically disinformation campaigns. They wanted to keep this one under wraps because it was exploring the potential connections between UFOs and demonology."

"Sounds right up your alley," says James.

"No shit," I concur.

"Yes, I believe that's why the Collins Elite asked me to join their team, so to speak. But as I was telling you, that name began as a joke. One of the consultants to the group in the early days was a Quaker expert on devil worship from the little town of Collins in Erie County, New York. Almost everyone else in Collins worked in the cheese factories they

had there – there were ten, I believe – so the other members of the think-tank started joking to their Quaker friend that he was ‘the elite of Collins.’ That joke eventually got turned around a bit and started being used as a shorthand way of identifying the whole lot of them.”

“So the Collins Elite isn’t just another bunch of ‘privileged elitist pricks’...” I conclude.

“No – far from it. Most of them, I would say, have been scared shitless by what they’ve discovered. They fear for their very souls. That tends to make them less self-centered and more concerned with the ultimate fate of humanity.”

“So what have they discovered?” I ask Lloyd.

“Quite a bit actually, but much of that information is of the sort that you get when a roomful of blind men feel up an elephant and describe its various parts. The UFO enigma is the unseen elephant in the room.”

“But I thought the aliens were the ones feeling *us* up,” says James.

“If you can believe Whitley Strieber...” I append.

“It’s hard to know exactly *what* to believe,” says Lloyd, “as your newspaper article so aptly demonstrated.”

“You read that?” I ask him.

“Of course. That’s why I’m here.” Smiling like an indulgent parent, Lloyd gives me a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. “It’s kind of like peeling an onion, isn’t it? There are layers upon layers to get through. Most abductees start out thinking they’ve been taken aboard a nuts-and-bolts spacecraft and probed by living, breathing aliens. Then, somewhere along the line, they start to learn about government-sponsored mind control projects like MKULTRA and its offshoots – and they start to wonder if the whole

abduction scenario might have been staged for some nefarious psyops purpose.”

“I’m with you so far...” I say. I’ve been leaning toward just that conclusion for a while now.

“Project MONARCH,” James says without further elaboration.

“Yes, but for a select few, it goes even deeper,” says Lloyd, settling in. “They recognize that at least part of their experience seemed to take place in an alternate reality - or another realm of a holographic multiverse. And certain far-right elements within our military and intelligence communities are somehow deeply involved with that alternate reality, so much so that a diligent researcher might conclude that a vast, fascist-leaning medico-military-occult complex is at work behind the scenes with a black budget greater than the sum of the inflation-adjusted tax-dollars spent on the erstwhile Manhattan Project.”

Leave it to Lloyd to ride his pale horse straight to the top of Paranoia Ridge and then over the cliff into Cuckoo Conspiracyland. “I guess I haven’t gone quite that deep yet,” I admit to him.

“You will. I’m going to talk you through it tonight. Because now that you’ve put your name to that UFO article, you have a need-to-know.”

“A need-to-know what?”

“It will be easier if I explain that later. Right now, I think you could use a refresher course in the history of Deep Politics and High Weirdness.”

“Oh great....” I refill my glass of champagne and top off James and Lloyd’s glasses, too. It’s going to be a long night.

“For the Collins Elite, the whole thing started with Jack Parsons. Remember him?”

“Rocket boy whiz kid and heir apparent to Aleister Crowley...” I say, remembering. Lloyd had mentioned Jack Parsons to us once before, during our ill-fated trip to Esalen. “He was the co-founder of NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory – and also Aerojet, a company that builds rocket engines based on Parsons’ original designs, which are used on the Space Shuttle and most of the U.S.’s nuclear arsenal. But at the same time he was founding those companies, he was also running Crowley’s West Coast lodge of black magick out of his house in Pasadena.”

“The Agapé Lodge of the Thelemic Ordo Templi Orientis,” Lloyd fills in, reminding me of the lodge’s official name. He should know... James has told me that Lloyd is an official OTO member. Of course, I have no way of verifying that. He could be the Grand Snark of the Order of the Golden Poodles, for all I know.

“Parsons used to send up a prayer to the goat-god Pan before every rocket launch,” Lloyd informs us.

James fills in the gaps: “He also signed an oath saying he was the Antichrist, he jacked off in front of L. Ron Hubbard to bring on the Apocalypse, and he filmed himself hosing his own mom and the family dog.”

“All true,” Lloyd acknowledges, “except, perhaps, for that last part. Jack Parsons came to the attention of the Collins Elite when the FBI caught him stealing confidential documents from Hughes Aircraft with the intent to use those documents to secure a job in Israel.”

“So he was a motherfucking spy, too?” That’s James, pretending outrage.

“An aspiring one, at least, if you can believe the FBI. Parsons had a Top Secret government security clearance, but it was revoked in 1952. Prior to that, the Collins Elite brought him in for a series of interviews. They were particularly interested in his activities around 1946 and ‘47. As you might recall, on June 24th of 1947, Kenneth Arnold claimed to have seen nine ‘flying saucers’ skimming through the clouds near Mt. Rainier – an event that many consider the beginning of our modern age of UFO sightings. The Roswell Crash occurred a few weeks later, on July 4th. As it turned out, Jack Parsons happened to be acquainted with both Kenneth Arnold and Robert Goddard – the famous rocket scientist who lived and worked in Roswell, New Mexico.”

“So what?” I say. “All the sex-crazed, black-magick-practicing rocket-warlocks probably had weird connections like that back then. In the sixties, he probably would’ve been hanging out with Wernher von Braun and Lenny Bruce.”

“True, but the Collins Elite believed those connections might indicate something more than mere coincidence, especially after Parsons admitted during an interview that his sex-magick rituals out in the desert with L. Ron Hubbard could have been responsible for summoning those ‘flying saucers’ and their otherworldly occupants. He predicted that UFOs would play a significant role in converting the world to Crowleyanity and suggested that their arrival here had been made possible by the interdimensional energy portal he’d created by spritzing a Thelemically-charged sacrament from his fleshy magick wand during his so-called ‘Babalon Working.’”

“That just sounds like bragging,” says James. “Like, my magick wand can open bigger portals than your magick wand. So there!”

“You should know, Mister Cthulhu-Summoner...” I joke, recalling James’ attempt to piss at the moon while summoning demons from his balcony.

Lloyd grimaces. “James, please tell me you didn’t *really* try to summon Cthulhu.”

“Actually, it was Azathoth, Yog-Sothoth, and Nyarlathotep.”

“You didn’t!”

“I did. What can I say? I was drunk.”

“My god, man! What were you thinking?”

“It’s no big deal. Nothing happened. I asked them to give me what I want, but so far I haven’t gotten jack shit.”

“Are you sure of that? Contacting demons often results in severe cases of psychic backlash – as Jack Parsons found out the hard way. In 1952, he died after being horribly burnt and mutilated by an explosion of mercury fulminate in his home laboratory. He was only thirty-seven.”

“Yeah, well... Francesca left me. Does that count?”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Lloyd rests a plump palm on his nephew’s knee. “She seemed like such a wonderful girl – so full of life. And such a great little rump in those tight jeans she wore. *Good lord!*”

“Yeah... can we talk about something else?” James obviously still has some conflicted feelings about his soon to be ex-wife.

“How about that L. Ron Hubbard?” I say, trying to get us back on track. “Infesting the world with aliens and then

saying Scientology could clean things up... what an arrogant, duplicitous dipshit, huh?"

"According to the official Church of Scientology press release, Hubbard was working undercover for the Office of Naval Intelligence at the time," Lloyd tells us. "Supposedly, he'd been sent in to break up Parsons' 'very bad' black magick cult - but one must always keep in mind that Hubbard was a proven, pathological liar. Like most demagogues, he harnessed his psychopathic traits to exploit a bored and dissatisfied populace. He wasn't the first to do so and he won't be the last. But he was unique insofar as he used the philosophy and rituals found in the OTO's sourcebooks to provide the foundation for his twisted self-help cult."

I attempt to sum up: "So the guy who invented the rockets that are sitting under half the world's nuclear warheads, and another guy who was the psychopathic messiah figure for a worldwide cult founded on the principles of black magick... *those guys* supposedly ushered in our modern era of UFOs and alien abductions. And just so we're clear... the UFOs and aliens are really more like magickally-invoked elementals, or daimonic entities."

"Or simply demons. That's what a majority of the Collins Elite believes, for what it's worth. There's more, of course."

"There's always more..." says James with a conspicuous display of eyeball-rolling.

"Shall we discuss Francesca and your impending divorce instead?" Lloyd asks him.

"No way! Hit me with your best demonic UFO shit. Lay it on me, you fat fuck." *Fat fuck* comes across as a term of endearment the way James says it.

"All right then. Do either of you know much about Allen Dulles?"

"Wasn't he a Director of the CIA back in the fifties?" I'm a bit uncertain about the exact dates, but I know I've read some things about him in the past. I'm pretty sure MKULTRA was his baby.

"Allen Dulles was the first civilian Director of Central Intelligence, as well as the longest-serving Director. He was head of CIA from 1953 to 1961, but his influence within the Company goes far beyond even that."

I'm always amazed by Lloyd's ability to recall arcane facts and biographical details. Of course, he could just be bullshitting us, but every time I've followed up on one of his pronouncements with my own research, I've found him to be telling the truth. Jack Parsons, for example, really *did* do all the things that Lloyd told us about during our road trip to Esalen. I've read everything I could find about Parsons since then. He was like a character out of some deranged science fiction novel, but he really existed - and there's a statue at JPL and a large crater on the far side of the Moon named after him to prove it.

So now we're onto Allen Dulles:

"Not many people are aware of the fact that Dulles was a close friend of Carl Gustav Jung," Lloyd expounds, "but knowledge of that relationship is absolutely crucial to an understanding of certain postwar developments in the U.S. intelligence community and our present-day National Security State."

"Allen Dulles was into Jungian psychology?" I ask, dumbfounded.

“He certainly was... although he never sought treatment for his own quite obvious Rasputin complex.” Lloyd purses his lips into a sour little moue. “A pity, because our world might be a far better place now if the treatment had succeeded. It was actually the woman Dulles was having an affair with in Switzerland during World War II, Mary Bancroft, who was in analysis with Jung. She was the one who got Dulles and Jung talking to each other.”

“Was she just a total nutjob, or what?” asks James.

“Mary Bancroft was perhaps a bit of a narcissist, but otherwise supremely sane. She began seeing Jung in the mid-1930s because she’d been plagued by fits of persistent sneezing, which she’d properly intuited as having a psychological basis. During the course of four years of analysis, Jung helped her to completely overcome the sneezing fits, but by then she’d become interested in the deeper rewards of analysis – the journey toward successful individuation – and so she stuck with it. And thus, like the fabled Butterfly Effect that chaos theorists like to bandy about, Mary Bancroft’s sneezes had far-reaching consequences that ultimately resulted in the appearance of the huge black triangle UFOs over New York’s Hudson Valley that I’ve been looking into for the past several months.”

“Whoa! You’re gonna have to explain that one...” I say to Lloyd.

“Black triangles are flying around New York?” James asks him.

“My friends in the military call them *Black Deltas*,” says Lloyd. “They’ve been seen by literally thousands of people at this point. It’s almost as if they *want* to be seen. One even violated the airspace above the Indian Point Nuclear

Facility and hovered over a reactor. However, your friend Skeeze is the first person to have seen one on the West Coast that I'm aware of, which is why I booked a flight right out here once I saw your article."

"But that happened almost five years ago," I point out.

"Yes, but Skeeze is one of the very few witnesses who claims to be able to recall what happened to him once he was taken *inside* the UFO. For that reason alone, I'd very much like to have a word with him."

"Yeah, well, good luck with that," says James. "Right now he's sailing a yacht down to Mexico with Francesca and Crash's stoner witch girlfriend."

"Is that true?" Lloyd asks me, looking disappointed.

"It's a long story..." I sigh. James and I proceed to tell it to him. When we're done, Lloyd reciprocates by telling us a long story about Allen Dulles - specifically, how he twisted his friend Carl Jung's theories about UFOs and the collective unconscious to serve the CIA's perverse agenda:

Allen Welsh Dulles and his elder brother, John Foster Dulles, honed their skills in duplicity as senior partners at the prestigious Manhattan law firm, Sullivan & Cromwell - the lawyers of choice for a long list of Wall Street robber barons and amoral corporations. Both brothers were founding members of the Council on Foreign Relations. John Foster Dulles, the German Kaiser's personal attorney, was especially adept at helping families like the Rockefellers, DuPonts, Harrimans, Walkers, and Bushs to load up on lucrative German investments between the two World Wars - first, by passing bribes at the Versailles Peace Conference to assure that the treaty would benefit Sullivan & Cromwell's elite clients; and later, by shielding those

same clients from investigation for laundering Nazi funds and otherwise profiting from Hitler's crimes against humanity.

On November 8, 1942 – just before the Nazis sealed off Switzerland's borders and occupied all of France in retaliation for the American landings in North Africa – Allen Dulles arrived in Bern to assume his post as Swiss station chief for the Office of Strategic Services. The OSS was America's overseas spying agency, a forerunner to the CIA, and Bern at the time was a hotbed of espionage and financial intrigues. Dulles soon became the *über*-spider at the center of that intelligence web. He was said to have millions of dollars at his disposal and a direct line to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He also had a wife named Clover back at home in the States, but that didn't prevent him from starting up a convenient romance with one of his early spy recruits, Mary Bancroft.

Bancroft came from a family of Boston Brahmins who'd inherited *The Wall Street Journal*. Her father, Hugh, a Harvard-educated lawyer, had been publisher of the *Journal* for five years until his suicide in 1933. Bancroft was a dilettante journalist in her own right and she spoke fluent German. Dulles had been impressed by her insightful analyses of German news articles and speeches that she'd prepared for his Bern advance man in the OSS, Gerry Mayer. She met with Dulles for dinner not long after his move to Bern. They discovered that they had many mutual friends and a lot of other things in common. At thirty-nine, Bancroft was outgoing, well-connected, highly intelligent and intuitive, and sexually voracious outside of her blatantly "open" marriage to a Zurich businessman; Dulles, ten years

older, was much the same (except for the part about the Zurich businessman).

As Bancroft explained in her 1983 book, *Autobiography of a Spy*, when Dulles needed a translator for a memoir being written by Hans Bernd Gisevius – a senior agent in the Nazi *Abwehr* (the German intelligence service) who was in Switzerland to ostensibly develop contacts with the Allies so they could provide support for an *Abwehr* plot to depose Hitler – Dulles decided Bancroft was the right woman for the job. Gisevius hoped to have his memoir published simultaneously in English and German as soon as the war ended, thinking he'd be hailed as a hero if the plot to kill Hitler succeeded. Dulles, not completely trusting Gisevius, wanted Bancroft to spy on him while she worked on the translation, but he warned her that if she couldn't keep the project a secret "five thousand people will be dead."

(The assassination attempt – Operation Valkyrie – failed on July 20, 1944. Dulles was uncannily right about the number of lives at stake: According to the records of the *Führer Conference on Naval Affairs*, Hitler retaliated by ordering the execution of 4,980 German conspirators believed responsible for the July Plot.)

Anxious about the number of lives she might be putting at risk, Bancroft, a self-described "blabber," immediately booked an appointment with Professor Jung to see if he thought she could keep her mouth shut. Jung laughed and assured her that she could indeed keep such a secret, "Although probably only the prospect of five thousand corpses if you didn't would ever make you do it!" He thought her relationship with Dulles might prove interesting and he encouraged her to pursue it.

Bancroft soon settled into a regular routine during her weekly visits to Bern, spying for Dulles by day and jumping his bones by night – or engaging in “a bit of dalliance,” as she coyly described her bestial rutting with the legendary spymaster. Their pillow talk often revolved around Jung, whom Dulles knew mostly by reputation at that point (they had met only once, at the Harvard Tercentenary in 1936).

One of Jung’s early popularizers in America had been Aleister Crowley, who’d written a lightly mocking and widely-read article about Jung in the December 1916 edition of *Vanity Fair* titled, “An Improvement on Psychoanalysis: The Psychology of the Unconscious (For Dinner-Table Consumption).” In that article, Crowley had decreed: “Jung’s great work has been to analyze the race-myths, and to find in them the expression of the unconscious longings of humanity.”

That aspect of Jung’s work, so different from Freud’s sex-drenched repression theories, was what had initially impressed both Dulles and Bancroft – especially his 1936 essay, “Wotan,” which postulated that the archetypes of the old, primitive Teutonic gods were affecting the behavior of the entire German nation, and in particular its Führer, Hitler, a “man who is obviously ‘possessed’.”

Dulles wanted Jung to provide psychological profiles of Hitler, Mussolini, and other Nazi-Fascist leaders; he was also interested in Jung’s opinion on the effectiveness of Allied propaganda campaigns. In fact, he wanted Bancroft to ask Jung so many questions that her analytical sessions with him eventually became devoted to getting Dulles his answers. Then, early in 1943, Jung and Dulles finally met in Zurich at Jung’s house on the lake at Seestrasse 228, where they embarked an experimental “marriage between

espionage and psychology” and an intimate friendship that would last until Jung’s death on 6/6/61.

From that first meeting onward, Jung became a sort of senior advisor to Dulles on a weekly, if not almost daily, basis. In Dulles’ reports to OSS headquarters in Washington, Jung became known as Agent 488. Dulles made sure that special attention was paid to Agent 488’s analyses of how German leaders might react to the war’s events, especially Hitler, “in view of his psychopathic characteristics.” Jung had predicted that Hitler would resort to desperate measures in the end, including the possibility of suicide.

By 1945, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, was reading Agent 488’s views on the best way to persuade the German population to accept defeat, while Dulles was setting the stage for Operation Sunrise – a series of secret negotiations with Waffen-SS General Karl Wolff that resulted in the early surrender of German forces in northern Italy.

And then the war was over.

“So wait... you’re telling us Jung and Dulles psyched out the Germans and put an end to World War II?”

“I’m merely pointing out that they did their part for the Allied cause,” Lloyd says to me. “Jung’s role has never been widely publicized. If it had, his detractors never would have gotten away with floating the specious rumor that he was a closeted Nazi.”

“Jung was a Nazi?” James asks, feigning outrage again.

“He most certainly wasn’t,” says Lloyd, “but beginning around 1950, articles placed in the *Saturday Review of*

Literature and other sources suggested that he'd been sympathetic to the Nazi cause."

"First Aleister Crowley pimps for him in *Vanity Fair* – which must've laid some heavy guilt by association on him – and then the *Saturday Review* tries to take him down as a Nazi. It sounds like Jung could've used a good PR team."

"At least he had Allen Dulles on his side. Dulles wrote letters and went on television to vouch for Jung's deep antipathy to what Nazism and Fascism stood for."

"Yeah, but who can trust Allen Dulles?" I say. "Wasn't he the guy who helped import all those Nazi scientists to the U.S. during Operation Paperclip? I mean, didn't you already tell us that because of Paperclip the Nazi egregore ended up infecting the CIA's egregore with fascist ideology, which then led to MKULTRA and all kinds of other fucked-up schemes? Or am I not remembering that right?"

"You're remembering correctly, but that has no bearing on Jung's integrity," Lloyd tells me.

"Maybe not, but from everything you've told us so far, Allen Dulles sounds like a first-class prick."

"He's complicated, to be sure. A solid case could be made that he was a crypto-fascist traitor to his country," Lloyd says, leaning back on the couch as he pauses to think. "But let's not forget the tremendous strength of the historical currents he was attempting to navigate. Take Operation Paperclip.... At the end of the war, Dulles shared a house in Wiesbaden with his protégés, Frank Wisner and Richard Helms. All three of them worried that if the U.S. didn't take in all the high-level Nazi spies and scientists that they could find, the Soviets would put those same men to work and thereby leap ahead of us in every way that counted. So

Dulles smuggled the East German spymaster, Reinhard Gehlen, to the U.S. in an American general's uniform. Helms directed the search for crack kraut scientists like Werner von Braun and Hubertus Strughold to send west. And once Wisner became head of the Office of Policy Coordination in 1948, he started importing Byelorussian Nazis so they could be trained as American paratroopers who would then be dropped behind Soviet lines to spy and fight for us as the Cold War heated up. All of this was accomplished in direct violation of President Truman's edict that no members of the Nazi Party or their collaborators should be brought into the country. On the one hand, what they did was treasonous – but on the other, it was just a morally dubious collective undertaking by some hawkish government officials who believed they had America's best interests at heart."

"Sure. Let's turn a bunch of anti-Semitic mass murderers loose in America and see how that works out," James says. "I'm sure that went over just swell in the Catskills."

"I'm not saying it was the *right* decision," says Lloyd, "but it *is* what happened. And we should always keep in mind that Dulles was familiar with Jungian concepts. To give him the benefit of the doubt, perhaps he saw the importation of the Byelorussian SS and the Paperclip Nazis as a way of 'integrating the shadow' – reincorporating the despised and repressed collective values of humanity back into the consciousness of Main Street, U.S.A. – so that America could begin to acknowledge its own vile, imperialistic tendencies."

"I think you're cutting the guy way too much slack," James says. "He was just a tool for rich fucks like the Rockefellers, plain and simple."

"And America is still as imperialistic as ever," I point out.

“You’ll get no argument from me there,” Lloyd says. “In a large part, we have the Dulles brothers to thank for America’s postwar excesses. The two of them effectively ramped up the Cold War once Eisenhower was elected President. Ike appointed Foster Dulles as his Secretary of State and Allen Dulles as Director of Central Intelligence. It was a tag team that brought us such classic moments in Yankee imperialism as the overthrow of the democratically elected prime minister of Iran, Mohammad Mosaddegh, in 1953; and the coup d’état that deposed the freely elected leader of Guatemala, Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán, in 1954. Puppet dictatorships friendly to U.S. corporate interests were subsequently installed in both countries so we could continue to get our petroleum and bananas on the cheap.”

“Am I the only one who fantasizes about the Chiquita Banana Lady all covered in Vaseline petroleum jelly, or do you guys do it, too?”

“That would just be you, James,” I say, “you imperialist, Third-World-raping dog.”

Lloyd chuckles indulgently and says: “Buckminster Fuller used to joke that the acronym CIA actually stood for Corporate Invisible Army, but there was always some truth to the jest – especially during Allen Dulles’ tenure, which many consider the ‘golden age’ for CIA covert operations.”

“My stoner witch girlfriend happens to be Buckminster Fuller’s niece,” I mention to him.

“So I’ve heard.”

“How’d you hear that? Have you been spying on me?”

“Only if you consider James to be a master of espionage.”

“I am. I really am,” James says with extravagant smugness. “After all, I’m a proud graduate of the Project

MONARCH hypno-zombie school for assassins.”

“You can scoff all you want, but such mind control programs really do exist – and again, their origins in the U.S. can be traced to Allen Dulles.”

“That fucker!” James decries.

“On April 10th, 1953, Dulles addressed the National Alumni Conference of Princeton University on the subject of Brain Warfare,” Lloyd informs us. “He told his audience that the Soviets were ‘using brain perversion techniques as one of their main weapons in prosecuting the Cold War’ – techniques ‘so subtle and abhorrent to our way of life that we have recoiled from facing up to them.’ Well... as you might guess, Allen Dulles was just the man to face up to the Brain Warfare gap. After describing some of the enticing brainwashing procedures being utilized by the Soviets, the Red Chinese, and the North Koreans, Dulles lamented that we, in the West, ‘have no human guinea pigs, ourselves, on which to try out these extraordinary techniques.’ Three days later, he remedied that situation by authorizing the CIA’s largest and now most notorious mind control program, MKULTRA.”

“But I thought there were other mind control projects before that...” I say, “like Project BLUEBIRD and Project ARTICHOKE.” I’ve done some independent reading on the subject.

“Of course,” Lloyd confirms, “and Dulles had a hand in those other projects as well. In fact, he’d named MKULTRA’s direct predecessor, Project ARTICHOKE, after his favorite vegetable. Some CIA insiders have told me that Project ARTICHOKE was actually the nastier of the two, so ‘abhorrent to our way of life’ that the CIA’s Security Research branch launched Operation Dormouse in 1975,

during the Church Committee investigations, to divert public attention away from ARTICHOKE and back toward MKULTRA, since the bulk of MKULTRA's incriminating paper history had already been destroyed on the order of Richard Helms in 1973."

"Helms, the same guy who roomed with Dulles in Wiesbaden?"

"The very man. Richard Helms served as Director of Central Intelligence from 1966 to 1973. He knew that if ARTICHOKE hit the fan and was sprayed across the front page of the *Washington Post*, it would be the end of his career. Project ARTICHOKE used hypnosis, torture, and psychoactive drugs during sometimes 'terminal' interrogation routines. Dulles had been a bit disingenuous with the Princeton crowd about not having any 'human guinea pigs' at his disposal. ARTICHOKE's ultimate goal was alluded to in a CIA memo from January 1952 that posed the question, 'Can we get control of an individual to the point where he will do our bidding against his will and even against fundamental laws of nature, such as self-preservation?'"

"And the answer to that question is: 'You want hypno-zombie assassins? We can do it! No problem!'" James fills in. "Everybody knows that now, thanks to Sirhan Sirhan."

I was already thinking pretty much the same thing. "We've heard this MKULTRA stuff from you before," I say to Lloyd. "So what's it got to do with Jung and UFOs?"

"I was just getting to that, actually..." Lloyd says, leaning forward to pour the last of the champagne into my glass. "In the early nineteen-fifties - right around the time that Dulles was assembling all the military and civilian 'Brain Warfare' projects under the MKULTRA umbrella and

handing control of it over to Richard Helms and Doctor Sidney Gottlieb – Jung, over in Switzerland, was becoming fascinated by UFOs. By 1954, he was being accused in the press of being a UFO nut. In response to his critics, Jung published *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. That came out in 1959. Now, if you happen to have read that book, or Jung’s autobiography, you’ll know that he suggested that in many places throughout the world, people are being robbed of their cultural independence and their spiritual autonomy, causing them to secretly hope for redemption – for Christ’s return. That Christ-image, however, has assumed a new form in our age of technology. According to Jung, it’s now a flying circular symbol that represents a synthesis of the opposites within the psyche: the modern UFO.”

“So UFOs are God?” I ask in a guileless tone.

“They’re piloted by demons, Crash!” James barks at me. “Get it straight!”

“Jung seemed to imply that they were projections from the collective unconscious – the UFO as an archetype that gets its power from human belief. Which is a good starting point, if you ask me,” says Lloyd. “Now, the timing here is interesting.... In 1952, there was a famous wave of UFO sightings over Washington, D.C. during two July weekends in a row. The UFOs showed up on radar, they were visually confirmed by Air Force pilots, and newspaper photos caught them zooming right past the Capitol dome. It was front-page news. The Pentagon held the largest press conference since World War Two so that Air Force Major General John Samford could try to explain away the whole affair as mirage effects caused by temperature inversions. No one who’d witnessed the phenomena believed him.”

“So this was the real deal?” I ask Lloyd.

“I used to think so. Now I’m not so sure. A while back, I ran across some articles written by an obscure chemist who’d worked at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Leon Davidson was his name. He did some independent research into the Washington UFO flap and came to the conclusion that the whole thing had been staged. He knew that the technology to create false readings on radar screens has existed since at least 1945. It’s called Electronic Countermeasures, or ECM. With a nod to Einstein, Davidson came up with a rather elegant equation: $ECM + CIA = UFO$. It’s a summation of his belief that the CIA was using ECM technology to provide bogus radar confirmation of UFOs, so that more people would believe in them. He suspected that pre-planned ‘flying saucer’ events were being used as a psyops tool in the Cold War. And whom do you think Davidson singled out as the mastermind behind this crafty scheme?”

“Allen Dulles!” James and I both say at once.

“Right. Davidson wrote that Dulles had ‘adopted a concept from his old friend Carl Jung, and co-opted the myth that benign aliens have visited Earth for millennia.’ It was done with magicians’ illusions, tricks, and showmanship. Hell, for all we know, Dulles might have been cutting back channel deals with Disneyland’s Imagineers.”

“Why?” I ask. “What was the point?”

“Davidson suggested that trumped up UFO sightings might be used to sow confusion and doubt about legitimate military test sightings, such as the U-2 spy plane taking off from Area 51. And carefully leaked stories about UFO crashes like the Roswell Incident could have frightened the Russians into thinking that the U.S. had access to incredibly

advanced alien technology. I realize that sounds counterintuitive in light of the strenuous efforts by the Air Force to deny, debunk, or cover up almost everything related to UFOs, but there's solid evidence that saucer believers and their organizations, like NICAP, were unwittingly used as CIA propaganda vehicles to further belief in extraterrestrial encounters. If it hadn't been for this relatively small number of early extraterrestrial enthusiasts, the concept of UFOs coming from outer space might not have caught on."

"That's so twisted it almost seems like genius," I say.

"Welcome to the Luciferian realm of Allen Welsh Dulles," Lloyd says. "By 1953, Dulles, Wisner, and Helms had become the CIA's Unholy Trinity - father, son, and Unholy Ghost - although Wisner suffered a mental breakdown in 1956 and was replaced in that equation by the master spy appointed by Dulles as his Counterintelligence Chief, James Jesus Angleton."

"Jesus! He had the right middle name for it, at least," I point out.

"When Angleton was at Yale, he edited a poetry magazine called *Furioso*. He used to hang out with T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound," James tells me. "Cool guy."

"Think about what they were up to in those days," Lloyd marvels. "Wisner had become Deputy Director for Plans and was busy subverting the free press in America and abroad with Operation Mockingbird. He bragged that he had so many journalists on his payroll that he could play the major media outlets 'like a mighty Wurlitzer.' Helms had become Wisner's Chief of Operations, still tasked with overseeing MKULTRA and toppling foreign governments, among other covert action ops. Angleton was hunting moles

and cultivating his ties to Israel's Mossad and the Italian Mafia. And Dulles, God-like, watched over it all as DCI."

"And these guys were all working overtime to make the public believe in aliens?"

"That's my take on it," says Lloyd. "I'm convinced the CIA was purposively deceiving not only the general public, but also other branches of government. They had good reason: If they could create the impression that a shadow faction within our own government had direct dealings with extraterrestrials, they could accrue almost limitless power and black budget funding."

"Give us all your tax dollars, or the little grey guys fly down here in their fleet of spaceships and go on a butt-probing rampage," says James in his velvety, midnight radio DJ's voice.

"Some researchers believe that process was actually begun in 1954," Lloyd elaborates, "when President Eisenhower went missing for a day while he was vacationing in Palm Springs. A newswire report went out announcing his death, but it was soon contradicted by another report stating that Ike had been spirited away for an 'emergency dental treatment.' Others contend, however, that while the President was out of sight he was secretly taken to Edwards Air Force Base, where he was shown some flying saucers and introduced to their passengers: a visiting delegation of tall, blonde aliens with icy blue eyes known as the 'Nordics.' Supposedly, it was the first of a series of meetings with various extraterrestrial races, which resulted in a treaty being signed between the United States of America and the Galactic Federation of Whateverthefuck."

"That sounds like fucking bullshit," I say.

"I don't entirely trust the original sources for the story myself," Lloyd admits, "but imagine if Dulles and Company had been able to stage such a thing convincingly enough so that Eisenhower bought it. That would help explain the CIA's ever-expanding black budgets and its metastasizing influence over our country's affairs. By the mid-fifties, J. Edgar Hoover had become so jealous of the exponentially increasing power of 'Wisner's gang of weirdos' that he sicced Senator Joseph McCarthy on them. Aided by the FBI's interagency snooping, McCarthy started accusing the CIA of being 'a sinkhole of communists' - but he was no match for Wisner's mighty Wurlitzer. Operation Mockingbird destroyed the red-baiting senator's reputation *tout de suite*."

"That was probably a good thing," James observes. "So maybe the CIA's not so bad, after all."

"John F. Kennedy didn't share your benign view," Lloyd counters. "Right after the failure of the Agency's Operation Zapata in 1961 - more widely known as the Bay of Pigs Invasion - Kennedy said he wanted to 'shred the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter them to the four winds.' Of course, we all know what happened to Kennedy."

"*Blammo!*" says James.

"Kennedy fired Allen Dulles as Director of Central Intelligence right after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, but two years later LBJ turned around and asked Dulles to serve on the Warren Commission investigation into JFK's assassination. A slight conflict of interest there, I would say... especially since Dulles likely set the assassination plot in motion in the first place. He and Helms and Angleton would have been just the men to pull it off."

“So it was Allen Dulles on the grassy knoll!” James shouts in a facetious *Aha!* moment.

“I believe he masterminded the scheme,” Lloyd says, draining the last of his champagne with a nonchalant tip of his glass. “And he undeniably played a leading role in the subsequent cover-up. Helms or Cord Meyer would have organized the shooters – David Sánchez Morales, Frank Sturgis, and E. Howard Hunt, perhaps – and made sure they were provided with counterfeit Secret Service IDs for a quick getaway. Angleton would have handled the Mafia’s end of things – Carlos Marcello and Jack Ruby’s services, in particular. CIA hits within the U.S. were usually contracted to the Mafia in those days, but I suspect the so-called ‘rogue elements’ within the Agency would have wanted to keep things a bit more personal for Kennedy’s Big Event.”

“Can you really call them ‘rogue elements’ when you’re talking about some of the famous names in CIA history?” I ask Lloyd.

“No. You really can’t,” Lloyd says with a shake of his massive head. “JFK’s assassination was a nothing less than a *coup d’état* orchestrated by the CIA – at the behest, perhaps, of General Lyman Lemnitzer and the other Joint Chiefs of Staff – on behalf of a shadow oligarchy of obscenely rich and powerful globalists operating behind the false front of American democracy.”

“But what about Lee Harvey Oswald? How did he fit it?”

“Oswald... that poor numbskull. When he said, ‘I’m just a patsy!’ truer words were never spoken. Remember Allen Dulles’ spy-mistress in Switzerland, Mary Bancroft? She happened to be a very good friend of Ruth Forbes Paine Young, mother-in-law of Ruth Paine – the woman who took in Marina Oswald and her children and helped Lee Harvey

Oswald get a job at the Texas School Book Depository. Oswald allegedly stored the rifle that killed Kennedy in Ruth Paine's garage. The testimony of Ruth Paine and her semi-estranged husband, Michael, took up more pages in the Warren Commission Report than the testimony of any other witnesses - and the Paines probably did more than anyone to condemn Oswald as the lone gunman. Did they have CIA connections? It was a question worth asking, but no one on the Warren Commission wanted to go there. However, I can tell you that Ruth's older sister, Sylvia, had been working for the CIA for eight years at the time of the assassination and Michael Paine did highly classified work for Bell Helicopter, a major Defense Department contractor. So what do *you* think?"

"I think you told us about the Paines once before, on our road trip to Esalen," I say. "Only that time it had something to do with the psychic research being conducted by Andrija Puharich."

"That's right!" Lloyd says, slapping my knee. "Michael Paine's mother, Ruth, and his stepfather, Arthur M. Young, were Puharich's friends and financial backers. Young had invented the Bell helicopter and Ruth happened to be an heiress to the Boston Forbes family fortune, so they were both exceedingly wealthy. And Puharich, as you know, had been a recipient of CIA black budget funding since at least the early fifties, when he first contacted The Nine during his research into ESP. That covert funding continued to flow his way throughout Allen Dulles' tenure as DCI and beyond - right up to the Star Kids mind control program at Puharich's Turkey Ranch, which ended in arson. Now, the question we should be asking is: Why would the CIA be interested in funding projects that tried to establish contact

with non-human entities, like The Nine, that emanated from some alternate reality? Did the CIA know that such entities existed?"

"This goes back to Carl Jung again, doesn't it?" I say to Lloyd. "Jung used to tell people that he was in contact with a spirit guide - his personal daimon. I'm blanking on the name right now. It's right on the tip of my tongue...."

Lloyd supplies the answer for me: "Philemon. He referred to his daimon as Philemon."

"Right!"

"It was Philemon's prompting that led Jung to his theories about archetypes and the collective unconscious."

"But was he real?"

"You mean to say: Did Philemon exist independently, outside of Jung's own mind? Jung believed that he did. And so, apparently, did Allen Dulles."

"So Jung and Dulles talked to demons," James says.

"*Daimons*, not demons," Lloyd clarifies. "There's a difference. For the ancient Greek philosophers, like Socrates, a daimon was thought of as a spiritual mentor - an intermediary between the realm of pure spirit and this perilous realm of the flesh - a guide from the Other Side who accompanies you from birth onward to coax and shape your soul during your earthly life. A demon, on the other hand, is just a prideful, pathological entity that feeds off the energy of others. A demon has Satan's corporate muscle behind it, but a daimon is a free agent. That distinction was important to Jung, although it may have been lost on Allen Dulles, judging by the strange fruits of his CIA projects."

"You said you were looking into black triangle UFO sightings. Are those somehow connected to the CIA?" I ask

Lloyd.

"I believe that they are, although I can't say exactly how just yet. They're either part of a CIA psyops campaign using deep black military technology to further inculcate the public's belief in aliens and UFOs, or they're the real deal, piloted by demonic entities summoned here by black magick rituals."

"Like by Jack Parsons and Aleister Crowley," I say.

"Exactly," says Lloyd. "The triangle is the ultimate symbol of control in black magick. Think of the pyramid on the back of our dollar bills with the Eye of Providence at its apex - the Illuminati's most widely recognized sigil. So the craft's shape is telling. These aren't Jung's benign alien-as-Christ archetypes from ancient mythology."

"They're sadistic lizardfartsouls sent here to core the anuses out of cows and jerk us off to create Loosh-eating alien-human hybrids," James says with unearned authority.

"Or not," I say, and leave it at that.

"That's why I wanted to talk to your friend, Skeeze," says Lloyd. "Because as it stands, he could be telling the truth about what he saw, or he could be recalling a post-hypnotic screen memory that was implanted in his psyche while he was drugged and hypnotized during a military abduction, or MILAB, conducted for the CIA's own obscure but undoubtedly nefarious purposes."

"This is all so fucking convoluted..." I complain to Lloyd.

"Now perhaps you can understand why James Jesus Angleton said that 'Deception is a state of mind and the mind of the State' - and why he cribbed a line from T.S. Eliot to describe the intelligence game as a 'wilderness of mirrors.' It's incredibly difficult to separate the truth from

deliberate disinformation - especially when it comes to UFOs."

"Yeah, but implanting screen memories? That seems a little labor intensive..." I say. "Why go to all that trouble with a stoned surfer like Skeeze?"

"More to the point, you might ask why they did the same to you with that flimsy screen memory of an ass-kicking Easter Bunny."

"Who says they did anything? Where's the proof?"

"The proof is to be found in your medical records in Doctor Smiley's basement, if you want somewhere to start."

I stare hard at Lloyd's flabby face, but I can't tell if he's lying. "Have you seen them?" I ask.

"No," Lloyd says without hesitating, "but I have good reason to believe the records are there. And in light of your rare psychic talents, there's every reason to believe they've had their way with you."

"But I can barely knock over a house of cards inside a vacuum-sealed bell jar," I protest. "My psychic talents suck."

"That's because the psychic abilities you have now are just a tiny spillover effect from your compartmentalized THETA training. Once your THETA alter is activated, almost anything becomes possible. Psychic killers like you are one in a hundred million, Gordon. There's no way your handlers won't try to get you back under their control."

"Project MONARCH *owns* yo' skinny white ass..." James says, sounding like a blissed-out, lip-smacking Bootsy Collins.

Sometimes James really pisses me off.

“For the record,” Lloyd says, “I’ve never seen a single reference to Project MONARCH in any Freedom of Information Act documents released by the CIA. But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. While pursuing my admittedly curious line of research, I’ve run across countless people who’ve used the term ‘*Monarch programming*’ to describe what has been done to them. And in my capacity as a well-compensated bagman for the intelligence community, I’ve often delivered checks to be paid by the Monarch Assurance Company, which supposedly has branches in Omaha, Nebraska and the Isle of Man. Otherwise, the closest the CIA ever got to Project MONARCH might be Operation Often – another Doctor Sidney Gottlieb production – which was initiated in 1969 to explore the world of black magick. That project’s aim, according to Gottlieb’s mission statement, was to ‘harness the forces of darkness and challenge the concept that the inner reaches of the mind are beyond reach’ in order ‘to create a new kind of psycho-civilized human being.’”

“*Fuckin’-A!*” says James. “There it is!”

“Combine it with Project ARTICHOKE and some pornographic sex-programming,” I say, “and you’ve got the All-American sequel to our friend Rina’s movie, *Stalin Says*.”

“Oh, you boys have seen that, too, have you?” Lloyd smirks. “Quite the limited hangout they have going there... I must say I was impressed by how close they veered toward what’s really happening.”

“We just saw it tonight at the drive-in, on mushrooms,” James boasts. “Holy fuck! When Rina got it on with that Impertinent Mauve Thunderpump, I shot off a monster load right in my pants.”

"Is that so..." says Lloyd, nonplussed.

James shrugs. "Francesca cut me off about a week before she took off. I guess I'd been saving up."

"Thanks for sharing, James," I say. "Now I know what you meant when you said you were 'feeling sticky.' You can just burn that towel you used after you got out of the shower."

"Hey, I was clean by then."

"I don't care."

"Boys, boys... let's not let a little spermatozoa come between friends," Lloyd says. "If I'm right about your childhood encounters with mind control, you both may have found certain scenes in *Stalin Says* to be triggering."

"I sure got triggered... IN MY PANTS!"

"What I meant by that, James," Lloyd pontificates, "was that the film could have triggered repressed memories of the traumatic ritual abuse that splintered your childhood psyche into programmable alter personalities. To cite just one real-world example: In 1967, a young man named Luis Angel Castillo was arrested by the Philippine National Bureau of Investigation on suspicion of conspiring to assassinate President Ferdinand Marco in Manila. During his interrogations, Castillo was injected with truth serum, at his request, and he was put under hypnosis. While he was under - and later, during his normal state - it was discovered that Castillo had at least *four* separate alter personalities that had been hypnotically programmed. Each alter could be triggered by specific key words. One alter claimed to be Sergeant Manuel Angel Ramirez, assigned to the Strategic Air Tactical Command in South Vietnam. Tellingly, this alter insisted that he was the illegitimate son

of a certain mustachioed, pipe-smoking CIA official whose initials were A.D., who might be familiar to you as - "

"Allen Dulles!" James and I burst out.

"Exactly. It gets better," Lloyd tells us. "Another one of Castillo's alters said he had been hypnoprogrammed to kill a man riding in the back of an open car. A tall man with 'Oriental eyes' drove Castillo to the assassination site in a black car and provided him with a Russian sniper's rifle with the scope set at 500 yards. Although Castillo claimed he didn't know the name of his target, the scene of the designated hit was Dallas, Texas, and the date was November 22nd, 1963."

"No way!" says James. "He was there to kill Kennedy?"

"Yes," says Lloyd, "but according to Castillo, someone else took out the target first. So... *that's* what I meant when I said you might have found *Stalin Says* to be triggering. A specific scene, or a key word, could have reminded you of your own hypnoprogramming - or even *activated* one of your dormant alter personalities, if I hadn't seen to it that you'd both been properly deprogrammed."

"When did that happen?" I ask Lloyd. "I don't remember any mind control deprogramming after the accident. I had a meeting with a nasty little dweeb who showed up at Esalen claiming to be from the Scottish Rite Psychophrenic Research Program, but he turned out to be one of the Men in Black."

The color drains from Lloyd's florid face. "You never saw Doctor Felix?" he asks me. "Rob Felix? He promised me he would fly out to see you personally."

"Never happened."

"Oh... this is not good," Lloyd says, shaking his massive head. He turns to James. "You saw Doctor Felix while you were studying at Yale, am I right?"

"I hung out for a few hours with a guy from the Scottish Rite Psycho Program, or whatever, like you told me to – but his name wasn't Rob Felix. He told me Doctor Felix couldn't make it."

"Let me guess..." I cut in. "Was his name Bill Johnson?"

James nods his head. "I'm pretty sure it was... yeah."

"Oh shit." Lloyd holds his head in his hands. "*Shit, shit, shit.*" He looks at me from under his palms. One of his eyebrows is cocked wildly askew. "But Gordon, you're driving now..." he says. "What happened to your bouts of narcolepsy?"

"Oh. Stan Grof and Elmer Green took care of that for me with a little biofeedback training and NLP."

"Neurolinguistic programming?"

"Right. I haven't passed out from narcolepsy since."

"Well, thank god for Stanislav Grof and that Green fellow, at least," Lloyd says, lowering his hands into his lap. "But it sounds like you're both still in danger of being re-activated. I can't believe Rob screwed me on that."

"He's really old, right? Maybe he just forgot."

"Last I heard he was dying of Parkinson's disease in Arizona. But I should have followed up on this long before now."

"Hey, it's not like anything happened to us," says James.

"How would you even know?" Lloyd asks him. "If one of your alters had been activated, you'd have no memory of it."

"There wasn't, like, a rash of mysterious killings around the time you were at Yale, was there?" I ask James.

"Half the guys in Skull and Bones got their heads blown off," James says, cocking his thumb and forefinger into the shape of a gun. "Future Presidents and CIA directors with C-minus averages. It was no big deal, really. The killer was never found." He nonchalantly blows across the imaginary gun's imaginary smoking barrel.

"It seems I owe you both a huge apology," Lloyd says, looking genuinely contrite. "James, I never should have compelled you to go to Yale right after the accident. I had people in place there that I thought I could trust to look after you - I thought you'd be safe - but you obviously weren't ready for that environment."

"Was that why a couple of Secret Service-looking guys were always at the parties I went to?" James asks him.

"No comment." Lloyd turns toward me. "And Gordon... you *were* safe at Esalen. You were presumed to have drowned. I made sure that your tragic demise was noted in all the proper media outlets. But now that you've resurrected yourself by putting your name to that UFO article, they'll be coming after you again."

"Who? Who's coming after me?"

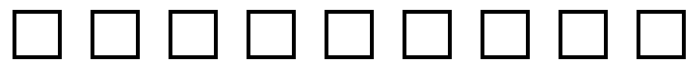
"Either your CIA handlers or the Men in Black - whoever gets to you first."



I still had a lot of questions, but Lloyd told us he had to be going. He said he would send us a competent mind control deprogrammer. He said he would provide security. He

suggested to us both that we should get out of Cambria, but upon cross-examination he admitted that the CIA's shadowy spooks could track us down anywhere - that American citizens were the most spied upon people in the so-called "free world" - so we told him we were staying put.

Just before Lloyd left, James made him promise to use his connections to find Skeeze's boat and make sure that Francesca and Kayleigh were okay. Lloyd said he'd intended to do that anyway, using satellite imagery, because he felt it was imperative for him to have a chat with Skeeze. Something very big was brewing, he portended. He couldn't say more, except to suggest that if an armada of black triangle UFOs were to suddenly appear above the White House, we should be very skeptical of our government's official response.



Two days later, Lloyd's sources reported that Skeeze's abandoned yacht had been found drifting just off the Brazilian island of Colares, near the mouth of the Amazon. All passports and other crucial items belonging to Francesca, Kayleigh, and Skeeze had been left behind in the yacht's cabin. There were no indications of foul play and no clues as to where the trio might have gone. We were treated to that old cliché:

It was like they'd disappeared off the face of the Earth.

The news reports said the three Americans were presumed to have drowned. James and I chose not to believe that - for our own very good reasons - but we didn't know where to begin to look for them.

Actually, I take that back... I knew one place where we could start, but we had no way of hitching a ride to the far side of the Moon.



BOOK TWO

*Through a Hoffman Lens
Darkly*

*THE ONLY WAY TO DEAL WITH AN UNFREE WORLD IS TO BECOME SO
ABSOLUTELY FREE THAT YOUR VERY EXISTENCE IS AN ACT OF REBELLION.*

—ALBERT CAMUS



ABBIE HOFFMAN'S FINAL HOUR

*Around three in the morning, April 12, 1989
Solebury Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania*

It was the stampeding of the llamas that woke him up. That, and the weird blue glow outside his window.... He got up, got dressed. He was usually up around this time, anyway. Insomnia. He had it bad - went to sleep for a few hours around midnight, then his itchy brain prodded him awake and he spent the rest of the night reading, or watching TV. Sometimes, around dawn, he could catch a few more hours of sleep if he was lucky. But tonight something's different. Something out there is really freaking those llamas out.

He lives in a renovated turkey coop on a ranch just outside of New Hope. The rent is four hundred dollars a month. Cheap, by New York City standards, but sometimes even that is tough for him to come up with. Like right now. He's almost dead broke. He's more famous than just about anyone - a sixties icon, *Superschmuck*, the guy who levitated the Pentagon - but being famous doesn't always pay the bills. His lecture bookings have been way off this year, but he'll get hassled to death if he tries to screw the IRS, so he just sent in his income tax payments. Like the government tax auditors, his exes and his kids are always after him for money too. And then there's his medicine....

Pills are expensive, man.

He needs to buy more of his usual antihistamines - Ornade - and he recently filled prescriptions for Xanax, Temazepam, Inderal, and Ativan. It's like his body can't function anymore on this planet without pharmaceutical intervention. He's trying out a new drug called Prozac to deal with his manic-depression. It's way more expensive than lithium, but he hates the way lithium makes him feel - all bloated and subject to hair loss and brain sludge. So far the Prozac doesn't seem to be working, but they said it could take up to six weeks before it really kicks in.

So any day now, right?

Since last summer, he's also been popping Percocets to numb the pain in his broken foot - *fucking truck swerved right into me, like it was trying to kill me!* - but the car accident didn't stop him from getting to his meeting at *Playboy* on time.

That *Playboy* article he wrote with Jonathan Silvers about Reagan's "October Surprise" should have decided the election, but in the end, no one seemed to give a shit. Bush could cut treasonous back channel deals with the Iranians and steal the election from Carter and people just yawned about it. The Yippies! had turned into yuppies and now Bush was their President. It made him feel like he was becoming irrelevant.

Maybe he *is* irrelevant. Kids need to be educated to *disrespect* authority or else democracy is a farce. He truly believes that - it's what keeps him going. But in a real democracy he would have had his own nationally syndicated newspaper column by now. Hell, maybe even a late-night talk show. He would have been respected for all he'd done for society and the cause of liberty. Instead, here he is:

Fifty-two years old, living alone in a fucking turkey coop.

With llamas in his backyard - really scared llamas, running from one end of the pen to the other.

During the day, he practices his speeches on the llamas. "You are talking to a leftist," he's told the llamas. "I believe in the redistribution of wealth and power in the world. I believe in universal hospital care for everyone. I believe that we should not have a single homeless person in the richest country in the world. And I believe that we should not have a CIA that goes around overwhelming governments and assassinating political leaders, working for tight oligarchies around the world to protect the tight oligarchy here at home."

Gearing up for his speech at Vanderbilt University last week, he'd told the llamas how proud he was of his generation's accomplishments: "In the sixties, apartheid was driven out of America. We didn't end racism, but we ended legal segregation. We ended the idea that you can send a million soldiers ten thousand miles away to fight in a war that people do not support. We ended the idea that women are second-class citizens. We were young, we were reckless, arrogant, silly, headstrong... and we were right."

Now those llamas will follow him anywhere. He feels responsible for them. So he pulls on his cowboy boots and goes outside to see if he can help them get organized.

There's a gleaming black Lincoln Continental parked in the dirt driveway next to the llama pen. One of the old models, with the suicide doors, like the one Kennedy got shot in - only this one's a hardtop, not a convertible. He walks over to it. The windows are tinted almost black, but up close he can see through them. There's no one inside. The Lincoln looks brand-new. The window on the driver's side is open a crack and a new car smell is actually wafting

out of it. On the dash beneath the windshield he sees a pink hardcover book with a picture of a pug on it, shot head-on, its fuzzy, cute-ugly face almost smiling. The book is titled *The Extra-Pink Chica, or: The Art of Being Invisible*. Its author is someone named Solarcon Groovy.

Weird.

The llamas have calmed down now that he's out there with him. They're craning their long blonde necks toward him, blinking their bulbous black eyes with the heavy lashes, as if to ask: *Well, what do you plan to do about this, Abbs?* He doesn't know if there's anything he *can* do. He looks down at the ground, expecting to find some footprints in the dirt around the car, maybe a trail he can follow. But the only footprints he sees are his own.

Double-weird.

When he was living on the Lower East Side during the sixties, he dealt with a lot of strange characters. Freaks of all kinds congregated there, careening from crash pads, to soup kitchens, to arsenals, to armed insurrections. He'd been a well-known community organizer in those days - writing for the *Village Voice*, getting his picture in the *New York Post* - so he'd been a magnet for dangerous crazies and, later, unsmiling intelligence agents. The vibe he's getting off this glossy black Lincoln is a combo of both:

Maybe it belongs to crazy intelligence agents. Schizophrenic CIA spooks....

He takes a look around. No one lurking behind the trees, waiting to stab him with a poison umbrella. No snipers hiding behind a grassy knoll. Nothing. The wind has kicked up and there's an icy chill in the air. He decides he might as

well go back inside and wait for a knock at the door. If anyone's going to do anything, they can come to him.

He wonders if he should call his brother and tell him about the mysterious Lincoln. Jack probably won't appreciate a call at 3 A.M., but at least that way if something happens to him, his family will know it wasn't an accident.

When he opens the front door to the turkey coop, he realizes there's no way he'll get to make that call.

"Come in Abbie," says a tall, sumo-wrestler-wide Asian man wearing a too-tight black suit over a crisp white shirt. A vintage bowler hat with a curling brim sits on top of his head, also black and maybe two sizes too small. The Asian Man casually points a gun at him in the doorway, motioning with his free hand for him to step inside.

There are two other men behind the Asian Man dressed the same way, sitting in chairs they've pulled up next to his bed. One of them - Egyptian-looking, with a Salvador Dali mustache - holds up a green bottle of Glenlivet single malt Scotch whisky and shakes it at him like it's an oversized baby rattle.

The third man is impossibly skinny with a maggoty white sheen to his skin, like a resurrected cadaver. His yellowish, unblinking eyes don't seem to have any eyebrows above them, and his lips are a gluey burnt orange, as if he's wearing cruddy lipstick.

Skinny Cadaver Man wins the prize for weirdest creep of the trio. There's a plastic sandwich bag full of pills in his lap - a big stash of downers, from the look of it. Phenobarbitals.

They're here to fake my suicide, he thinks, suddenly terrified.

He turns to run, but Asian Man has already moved to the door and shut it behind him.

How'd he do that so fast?

The Asian Man is way too big to get around. "Time to get back in your bed," Asian Man says, with no inflection to his voice whatsoever. Each word comes out with the same strange lack of emphasis as the one before it and the one that follows.

In an instant, he gets a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. Unlike his many past encounters with authority figures, he does as he's told. He goes over and sits on the bed, then scooches over to stretch out his legs and lean his head against the pillows. If he doesn't lie still, he thinks he might puke. He notices that all three of the men are wearing black leather gloves.

That can't be good.

The old Abbie tries to stage a comeback. "What are you guys, Mormons?" he asks, just to get a rise out of them. No way are these guys wearing the sacred Mormon underpants. They're FBI or CIA, most likely. They've been trailing him for years, ever since that bit of guerrilla theater when he and Jerry Rubin threw out the money above the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange. By the time of the demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic Convention - when the Yippies! nominated a pig for President - undercover FBI agents had been all over him, as the Chicago Eight conspiracy trial proved beyond a doubt.

Fucking COINTELPRO....

The FBI has a file on him that runs to something like twenty thousand pages. Throw in his files from the CIA's

Operation CHAOS and the New York Bureau of Special Services (BOSS) and it's thousands more.

"We represent the Nation of the Third Eye," says the Egyptian Man in a metallic voice with a weird lilt to it, like some wind-up mechanical talking crow. The Egyptian Man's nose is quite a beak – even more formidable than his own heroic Jewish schnoz – and that skinny upturned mustache of his seems to have blue sparks running along its edges, like the tracers he's seen during hundreds of LSD trips. He's had an occasional acid flashback, but he's pretty sure this isn't one of them.

"Are all the people of the Third Eye Nation as fucking ugly as you guys?" he asks the Egyptian Man.

"Nothing is as it seems," the Egyptian Man answers vaguely, without rancor. He fills a glass with Glenlivet and hands it to Cadaver Man, who starts plucking pills from the bag in his lap and methodically cracking them in half over rim of the glass, one-by-one, so they can dissolve in the Scotch. He counts out the pills in a gloomy monotone:

"One... two... three... four... five... six...."

(you are going to drink that) the Asian Man says.

"Like hell I am," he shoots back, almost paralyzed. He's aching from every joint in his body. He must be past due for a Percocet. Then, with a shudder, he realizes that the Asian Man is talking to him from *inside* his own head, using telepathy or something:

(if you do not drink that we will take you with us and we will torture you for days and days on end and when you finally die we will cut you into pieces and put you in a barrel and sink it in the ocean where you cannot be found and your family and your friends will think you ran away

from them just as you ran away when you were barry freed only this time you won't come back as barry or abbie or anyone you will belong to us in the darkness of the ocean and you will never rise again)

"...twenty-three... twenty-four... twenty-five...."

"You're not giving me much of a choice there, are you?" he says. "It's either die now and look like I committed suicide, or get tortured and die a little later, hacked to pieces in a barrel."

(you can die as barry or abbie it makes no difference how but you must die your fate has been decided)

While he was hiding out from a bullshit cocaine bust during the seventies, his main alias had been Barry Freed. He'd fucked himself on that coke deal. He'd been set up, but he'd also been stupid. He *knew* the law was after him, so trying to make a big score by cutting someone else's coke with procaine from his brother's medical supply company was just an incredible lapse in judgment. It was almost like he *wanted* to get caught. But then, once he *was* caught and had spent a few weeks in the Tombs, all he wanted was to be free. He was sure he'd be murdered in prison if he did any serious time. So he skipped bail and got a nose job in California and then he went underground as Barry Freed. There was a dybbuk inside him, greased with chicken soup, saying: "Survive! Survive!"

Where's that dybbuk now, when I really need it?

"...forty-eight... forty-nine... fifty... fifty-one..."

"Don't you think fifty is enough to do the job?" he asks Cadaver Man.

Cadaver Man just slowly shakes his head and keeps on counting: "...fifty-two... fifty-three... fifty-four..."

Fuck.

This is making him crazy. He's oscillating between rage and self-pity, like a vibrating tuning fork, inside a body that's nearly frozen with indecision. He keeps asking himself, *What would Abbie do? What would Barry do?* as if those two names represent two different ways of being in the world, two different personas adopted by the anonymous method actor that is his True Self.

What's with him? He should be fighting like a cornered rat, but he can barely even lift his hands.

"...sixty-seven... sixty-eight... sixty-nine..."

As Abbie, he'd been arrested somewhere around a hundred times. He remembers laughing hysterically as the cops beat the crap out of him in an interrogation room in Daley's Chicago, remembers the hard smack of the billy club right across his face when those fat pigs chased him down the alley in Nixon's Washington. Abbie, with his long curly hair and the Cyrano nose. America's court jester in a red-white-and-blue flag shirt. The Yippie! fool they couldn't keep down.

He's had some good times as Abbie, but he's been irresponsible, too: ditching his first wife, Sheila, and their two little kids, Andrew and Ilya, to run off and play the impoverished community activist on the Lower East Side; ditching his second wife, Anita, and their son, america, when the cocaine bust went down.

Not good, not good....

"...eighty-one... eighty-two... eighty-three..."

In a way, he could be more proud of Barry, who managed to stay mostly faithful to his girlfriend, Johanna. Barry organized Save the River to fight, and eventually triumph

against, the Army Corp of Engineers' plans to devastate the delicate ecosystem of the St. Lawrence River by keeping a shipping lane open on it all through winter. He'd been doing just fine as Barry, actually, but ego-driven Abbie had insisted on resurfacing again in 1980, making a big media splash and getting his face on the front page of the *New York Post*.

These guys are here because of Abbie. Probably Bush retaliating for that "October Surprise" article, if nothing else....

"...one-hundred... one-hundred-and-one... one-hundred-and-two..."

He looks at all the framed pictures on the walls of his little home. Most of them are pictures of Abbie. Abbie on the cover of the *National Lampoon*. Abbie hanging out with John Lennon and Yoko Ono. Abbie high on hash oil with Jerry Rubin. Abbie shaking hands with Jimmy Carter after getting busted a few years ago with the former President's daughter, Amy, for protesting against the CIA's recruitment tactics on the University of Massachusetts campus at Amherst (that case went all the way to the Supreme Court, where he and Amy et al. won a ruling in their favor). Oh, and of course, there he is on the *New York Post*'s front page with the simple headline:

HERE'S ABBIE!

Abbie's egotism appalls him now.

But then his pride comes surging back: *At least I stood for something! At least I lived my life like it mattered! Like I could make a difference!*

"...one hundred and fourteen... one hundred and fifteen..."

If he ends up drinking from that glass, who will ever believe that his death wasn't a suicide? All the clues that would point to a suicide are already well in place - he knows that. He's been depressed lately. His life has lacked focus. His relationship with Johanna has been on the skids: he wants her to marry him, but she wants to keep living in New York and visiting him on weekends. And worst of all, he's been working on a book about his manic-depression. He was going to call it *The Hell of It*. About two hundred pages of notes are scattered around the turkey coop, which will probably be used as false confirmation of his suicidal state of mind.

"...one-hundred-thirty-three... one-hundred-thirty-four..."

He thinks about all the people he's going to disappoint if it appears that he's killed himself. His Ma, losing her battle with cancer. His brother, Jack, and his sister, Phyllis. His poor kids. His exes: Sheila, Anita, and the gorgeous Johanna. And his friends, especially those friends who helped him while he was a fugitive, when he was truly putting his life in their hands by letting them know he was still around. Most of those people will be sad to hear he's dead - but the only thing he knows about grief is that it passes. So it might be kinder to let those people know he's truly gone, rather than to keep them hoping that someday he'll come back.

Either way, I'm screwed.

"Can I at least write a note?" he asks the Asian Man.

(you can write whatever you want if it will help you decide) the Asian Man answers from within his head.

"...one-hundred-forty-nine... one-hundred-fifty."

"It's time," Asian Man says, using his lips again.

“Fuck it. I’ll take the drink, okay? Just give me a writing pad and a pen first,” he says, pointing to a stack of yellow legal pads on top of the cinderblock bookshelf across the room. “I don’t think I can get off the bed.”

The Asian Man hands him the writing pad and a black ballpoint pen. Then Cadaver Man offers him the glass of cloudy whisky.

“Drink first then write,” the Asian Man commands.

“What if it dulls my finely-honed literary sensibilities?” he quips.

(drink first or we will chop you up and stuff you in a barrel)

“Fine, have it your way....” He takes the glass and gulps it down. It tastes like poison – which, of course, it is. Just the act of drinking it makes him feel dizzy.

Dizzy and doomed....

That suicide note isn’t likely to get written. Those freaky bastards would probably steal it, anyway, as a souvenir.

Egyptian Man leans over and fills the glass with Glenlivet again. “You must drink more to get the full effect,” he says in that mechanical singsong voice of his as weird blue sparks ripple off the tips of his creepy mustache.

Barry drinks. He’s decided to go out as Barry.

That way Abbie can remain defiant to the end.

FAME, FORTUNE, AND OTHER F-WORDS

*Winter 1988 to Spring 1990
Cambria, California*

James never left - until he left for Hollywood. What I mean by that is that James moved in with me right after our midnight visit with his Uncle Lloyd, and he ended up staying until he moved to Los Angeles a year-and-a-half later.

At first, he just wanted to hang out for a few days while the water damage in his house was being cleaned up. Then, after we were informed of Francesca's disappearance, he found that everything about the house reminded him of her - and those reminders were just too painful to bear now that Francesca was either dead or being pronged by lusty iguanamen on the far side of the Moon. So James sold his luxurious tree house, with all its pain-invoking memories. He made a half-hearted attempt at finding a new place, but nothing was ever right, so he stayed on as my roommate. I think he was just lonely. That, and the rent was cheap.

It was tight quarters with two big, smelly guys living in a one-room cabin, but I gladly put up with James because I had come to think of him as my best friend. It turned out to be a fun and productive time for both of us - although a little skeevy on the housekeeping front.

With Kayleigh gone, my sex life went into hibernation. I missed her far more than I could ever let on to James. To

compensate, I became more singularly focused on my work at the *Cambria Insurrectionist*.

As my darkroom skills bloomed, I started making surrealistic photomontages that Nora deigned to feature on the Arts and Entertainment page every week as a sort of community Rorschach test: Calliope's baby daughter, Marla, floated like a giant dirigible above Hearst Castle; a seal poked its nose out from a rain puddle in front of Old Camozzi's Saloon; and bulimic Bitsy Metcalf, preening in a hair salon, grew a parrot's head and exotic plumage in homage to Max Ernst's painting, *The Robing of the Bride*. Like the Surrealists before me, I was groping my way toward a symbolic language that would allow me to portray some of the more elusive and appalling truths about our human predicament.

I caught some flak for the psychosexual content of some of my more outré photomontages, but Nora, to her credit, never tried to censor me. On one occasion, she even came to my defense in response to a particularly irate Letter to the Editor from a subscriber who claimed to have been offended by my photomontage of a man who looked like Groucho Marx suffocating inside a wrinkled dry cleaning bag while a gigantic woman's hand emerged from the shadows to squeeze his failing lungs. I'd titled it "Love Can Take Your Breath Away." Nora's somewhat verbose reply to the pissed-off lady subscriber defended the sovereignty of the art spirit (as defined by Robert Henri) and quoted at length from Carl Jung - whom we'd been talking about quite frequently since my visit with Lloyd:

"There is no coming to consciousness without pain. People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own soul.

One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious."

During the spring of 1989, Nora's paychecks started to bounce; Bitsey Metcalf was having a hard time selling enough advertising to keep the newspaper afloat. Most of the staff quit around that time, leaving just Nora, Calliope, Bitsey, and myself. My life became a blur of twelve- and fourteen-hour workdays divided into green tea mornings and beery nights. To make up for my sketchy paychecks, Nora gave me a new title on the *Insurrectionist's* masthead – Creative Director – and allowed Bitsey to barter more advertising for whatever I thought I needed (like weekly breakfasts at the Cambria Pines Bar and Grill, or refurbished junkyard parts and labor at Glenn's Discount Tire and Auto on the dark day when the Posi-Traction rear axle ground itself to pieces in my Jeep).

More than ever, Nora said she needed writing from me to fill the newspaper's pages, so I started getting assigned to local color pieces, which I found lacking in thrills. Eventually, we hit upon the idea of doing a series of interviews that we collectively titled *Cambria Treasures*. Our inspiration came from the Japanese tradition of venerating certain highly accomplished artists, musicians, and writers by referring to them as Living National Treasures. We kicked off the series with a line I'd dug up from William Blake:

"The worship of God is Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best; those who envy or calumniate great men hate God; for there is no other God."

In my mind, that line provided me with all the bent justification I needed to become a “Journalist of the Soul” and go after interviews with some of Cambria’s most infamous oddball characters.

The list was long. Cambria seemed to be a magnet for independent thinkers and inspired dreamers. There was my drinking buddy from The Sow’s Ear, Warren Leopold, the rebel architect who’d owned and operated a whorehouse up in Alaska with Dashiell Hammett during World War II. And there was Phoebe Palmer, the visionary portrait artist, who rendered the tacky, polyester-clad visitors to Hearst Castle – with their sun-wrinkled skin and flabby bellies – in erotic poses modeled after 11th-century Tantric temple carvings. But perhaps most significant of all, there was Art Beal – alias Captain Nitt-Witt – the rabble-rousing, folk art genius creator of Nitt-Witt Ridge.

Back in the thirties and forties, Art had been a garbage collector whose route took him to Hearst Castle as that unsubtle monument to William Randolph Hearst’s greed and megalomania was being constructed. Art ended up using some of Hearst Castle’s discards to build a castle of his own on two-and-a-half acres of pine that he owned way up on a craggy ridge back in Cambria.

Over the years, Nitt-Witt Ridge grew into a rambling, whimsical architectural oddity that spanned nine levels up the side of the ridge’s 250-foot cliff. It was a castle of cast-offs, boasting archways of abalone shells and jagged rock walls fortified with hubcaps, beer cans, rusted truck axles, and the occasional toilet seat. While Hearst lavished millions on his vanity project and employed hundreds of laborers, Art scrounged most of his materials for free and

did the work on his own, carving out terraces with only a pickaxe and a shovel.

When I first saw it, Nitt-Witt Ridge struck me as a folk art masterpiece. It was – as Art himself fittingly described it – “the finest monstrosity this side of hell.”

By the time I was introduced to him, Art was well into his nineties. The wrinkles in his forehead were deep enough to hide nickels. He had a bulbous, pockmarked turnip of a nose. But his bold blue eyes were still young and alive with a bad boy’s twinkle and his mind remained sharp enough to give me a full accounting of his life and strange times.

To prepare for my newspaper story, I spent a number of days hanging out with Art on a sprung couch up in Nitt-Witt Ridge’s decrepit old crow’s nest, just shooting the breeze and watching the sunset with him. A beautiful calm swept over me every time I was up there, causing me to think, *This is the way life should be lived.*

(I didn’t know at the time that the whole place was rigged to explode with dynamite – bundles and bundles of old miners’ dynamite, sweating nitroglycerin, which could have gone off at any time. The San Luis Obispo County Bomb Task Force had to go in and very carefully dispose of it after Art’s death, but that was years later.)

My interview with Art Beal was published to great acclaim. I was finally getting some validation as a writer. Encouraged by fan mail and positive reviews from people on the street, I started writing a novel – a Big Sur freak fable centered upon a fictionalized version of Art, as Captain Nitt-Witt. I wanted to call it *Nitt-Witt Ridge*. When I told Art about the project, he gave me his full approval. “Seeing is knowing, and you see things in re-*al*-ity,” he told

me – a very high compliment, coming from him. Soon I was typing away almost every night.

James found the clacking of my typewriter keys inspiring, so he started working on a novel, too – a humorous vampire story with the title *Vampirism Made Easy*. We often worked together on those novels late into the night, drinking beer and making editorial suggestions after we had read our favorite passages out loud, doing our best to crack each other up.

We even tried to start a literary salon, but that quickly devolved into just an excuse for the local poetasters to come over to our house and get drunk. The only other serious novelist in town was a spritely sexagenarian named Jean Brody, whom I intended to interview for my *Cambria Treasures* series. But Jean didn't drink or smoke pot, so she really had no use for us. I don't think she would have appreciated seeing James, barefoot and stoned on top of a coffee table, reading in the voice of a lust-crazed Southern cracker from Barry Hannah's short story collection, *Captain Maximus*, while Warren Talcott's mangy Dandie Dinmont terrier, Bartleby, cravenly licked at his toes.

At some point we covered a 4' X 8' sheet of plywood with black roofing paper and stood it up against a wall inside the house so we could write graffiti on it with silver and gold metallic ink markers whenever the mood struck us. Toward the top of the graffiti board was a quote from John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*: "Once more, the world was spinning in greased grooves." That's how the world often felt to us in those days, despite our missing female companions, despite the ominous threat hanging over us of prowling CIA handlers and Men in Black. Maybe it was just

the booze and the drugs, but we often found ourselves laughing our asses off.

What can I say? We were young, we were cocksure, and we felt invincible when we weren't hungover.

Of course, we were wrong about the "invincible" part.



A few days after our last literary salon debauch, I ended up interviewing Jean Brody, at that time Cambria's most famous novelist (but not for long...). The resulting article seemed to go over well, even though I trashed her first book ("...fine literature it's not. *Two sisters, a tornado, and a bunch of hysterical Okies!* The plot might have been dreamed up by Steinbeck during one of his more severe hangovers..."). But I had only good things to say about her subsequent novels and I was told my photos of Jean made her look dignified yet sexy, which was quite a feat, considering her age.

Somewhat surprisingly, my photographs had been gathering as much praise as my writing in the *Cambria Treasures* series. People had been offering to pay me to take their portraits and local galleries had expressed interest in selling my photomontages from the *Insurrectionist's* Arts and Entertainment pages. I had already followed up on some of those moneymaking arrangements with happy results. So I was primed for the opportunity when, shortly after Jean's interview was published, Rina Rowley contacted me at the newspaper to ask if I'd be interested in shooting some publicity stills for her.

Rina explained that an Udo Salmanski film she'd starred in years ago was finally getting a North American release. The film's producers wanted to capitalize on Rina's escalating fame from *Stalin Says* and her upcoming movie, *Lap Dance Me Deadly*, co-starring Demi Moore. (*Demi Moore?* My mind boggled. Rina had somehow moved up to the A-List. Either that, or Demi's stock had suddenly plunged.) The Salmanski film had played in European theaters as *Caligula's Sperm Cake*, but to avoid a public outcry in the Bible Belt states the producers had renamed it *Caligula's Kissing Cousins* and hired Gore Vidal to provide voiceover narration. Rina told me the movie was about sexual perversity in ancient Rome, so she would be wearing a toga for the shoot. She also hinted that there might be some nudity involved.

I told her that all sounded great. We agreed on a time and then she gave me directions to her parents' ranch out in Creston, where we would meet. After she hung up, I got right back on the phone and called James to ask if I could borrow his Mamiya. I thought Rina's publicists might appreciate having photos with the extra sharpness and detail that a medium-format camera could capture. I also had some small hope that a lucrative and sexually rewarding new career might be opening up for me as a celebrity photographer. I wanted to do my best to impress.

James didn't have a problem with me borrowing the Mamiya, but when he found out that I'd be photographing Rina in a toga, he insisted on going along as my photo assistant. He said I would find his help invaluable and he swore he wouldn't do anything to undermine my role as "the designated photographic artist."

He was lying, of course.

Much to our mutual dismay, when we arrived in Creston we found out that Rina's mother had decided to join us for the photo session. She was a short, wiry, freckle-faced woman with frizzy brown hair and a no-nonsense attitude. It was hard to believe she was the progenitor of her daughter's lurid beauty. During a round of iced tea, Rina tried to talk her out of playing chaperone, but her mother wouldn't be dissuaded. So after a quick look at Rina's modeling portfolio for inspiration, all four of us piled into my Jeep and we drove up the coast to San Simeon for the shoot.

I took a left turn off the highway at San Simeon Cove and parked under the eaves of Sebastian's General Store. From there, we retraced the route I'd taken ten months earlier to see the migrating monarchs. Rina had some trouble climbing over the rusty barbed wire fence with its dinged-up *No Trespassing* sign ("Here, let me hold your toga for you," James offered gallantly, sneaking a peek at her breasts). There were no monarchs to be seen fluttering about as we walked up the red clay bluff to the eucalyptus grove – it was still too early for them. So we kept on walking, following a deer trail until we arrived on the far side of a peninsula known as San Simeon Point.

Although it was privately owned by the Hearst family, I had been out hiking on San Simeon Point many times since my move to Cambria. It had become my favorite spot on the Central Coast. It was a place of immense natural beauty, full of dark and twisted cypress trees and ancient, gnarled pines, where deer could be glimpsed in pools of ghostly sunlight, while just beyond, the ocean thundered against huge, sea-scoured slabs of stone upended by long-ago

earthquakes. I couldn't think of a more perfect location for Rina to get naked.

For my first set-up, I positioned Rina in slanting sunlight on a rocky ledge with a lot of picturesque outcroppings to her right and a churning corridor of seawater erupting into plumes of salty spray just beyond her. As I was raising the Mamiya, I heard James say, "Okay, now take off your clothes...."

We may not have known much about art in those days, but we both knew what we liked.

Rina's mother intervened: "I think the idea was that she'd be wearing her toga for these shots." She looked to me for confirmation. I slowly nodded my chin.

Rina let out a huff and stopped flashing her tits.

"I hope you got that," said James.

I made a sheepish grimace. I hadn't been quick enough on the trigger.

"Don't worry... you'll get another chance," Rina said. "This is nothing compared to what I went through for *Cleveland Steamer*."

"Rina! You promised me you'd never talk about that!" her mother scolded her.

"A Ukrainian grandma took a shit on me... but whatever."

I'm pretty sure that was the moment James fell in love.





The shoot proved to be a success, even though James had spent the remainder of it flirting like a maniac. Rina seemed to enjoy the extra attention and she flirted right back, which made for some good photographs. When I showed her the proof sheets a few weeks later, she told me that no other photographer had ever captured her as perfectly as I had. I wanted to believe her, of course, but I knew there was a good chance she was only massaging my ego. By then, she and James had started dating – and she wouldn't want to risk being impolite to her new boyfriend's roommate.

James bragged about Rina's hotness and her willingness to do almost anything with him in bed. One night, raving drunk, he gave me a blow-by-blow of their early sexual encounters, even though I kept trying to change the subject. I didn't want to hear about his orgasmic triumphs while I was back in my Sensuous Hermit mode, suffering the No Pussy Blues. Eventually, as so often happens with male friends when one of them falls for someone new and the other stays celibate, James and I spent less time talking to each other and we grew apart, although we continued to live together.

In the meantime, I'd been keeping my pledge to our absent friend, Skeeze, faithfully feeding the rats every few days up at Buckthorn Manor (a.k.a. the Rat Castle, a.k.a. Karni Mata West).

My early forays inside the Manor had been tentative. I'd felt like a trespasser, gazing through the old leaded windows onto the surrounding pines, stepping quietly across the herringbone floors, keenly aware of the smells of dust, old cooking, and mildewed velvet curtains. I passed Skeeze's silenced Theremin, still on the Victorian parlor

table with the brown Bakelite radio beneath it connected to an orange extension cord. I passed the charred Cub Scout mannequin still suspended on a spit in the fireplace. I passed the blank, cyclopean eye of Skeeze's gargantuan television, and next to it, his videotape collection of UFO documentaries and gonzo porn. It seemed wrong to touch anything, as if I would be sullyng a museum exhibit. But then, once I reached the kitchen, the rats started making me feel at home.

They came scampering in waves as I tore open the thick plastic bag I was carrying and started laying out their *tacos con queso* on the kitchen's linoleum floor. They stood on their haunches and patted their tiny forepaws against my ankles, twitching their whiskers and keenly blinking their beady black eyes up at me, as if to say *Thank you*. I watched them lap up their goat milk with comic gusto, like miniature pirates celebrating around a washtub full of rum. Then, just as I was bending over to pour another half-gallon of milk, a large white rat (Samsara, perhaps?) climbed up the front of my shirt, latched onto my collar, and leaned her warm body against my throat. I could have sworn she was nuzzling me.

After that, I started looking forward to my thrice-weekly rat visits. As the months passed, I also started exploring the rest of Buckthorn Manor, totally unprepared for what I would eventually discover.



So I had my rat pals and James had Rina Rowley. Our social circles were expanding. Soon we were both having encounters with the rich and famous (not that the rats

introduced me to Liza Minnelli or anything... it was a bit more complicated, but I'll get to that).

For James, those encounters translated into getting the things he wanted out of life, as if the demons he'd summoned on his balcony were finally making good on their bargain. Everything started going right for him in a spooky, almost supernatural way.

For instance, on his first trip to visit Rina in Hollywood, they met for drinks at Bar Marmont, where she introduced him to Bruce Willis and Demi Moore. Demi, in turn, introduced James to a hotshot literary agent named Nick Hellerstein, who'd become famous for his reality-distortion field while serving as one of Mike Ovitz's foot soldiers at CAA. Due to a recent falling out with Ovitz, Nick had just opened his own boutique agency. He promised to start a bidding war for James' unpublished novel, *Vampirism Made Easy*, sight unseen, in return for the usual agent's fee of fifteen percent. James told him the novel wasn't even finished, but Nick wanted to sign him, anyway - and as a show of faith, he arranged a practice pitch session for James with Don Simpson, the hugely successful producer (with Jerry Bruckheimer) of *Flashdance*, *Top Gun*, and *Beverly Hills Cop I and II*. Simpson-Bruckheimer productions were about sensation, speed, violence, and nudity - all flash and no depth. Intuitively, Nick saw James fitting right in.

When James walked into Don Simpson's ultra-luxe, all-white office on the Paramount lot, he was only scheduled to get five minutes with the big man, but the pitch went off so brilliantly (according to James) that they ended up snorting coke together and going out to lunch at Morton's. By the

time the check arrived, Don was saying (James was calling him Don by then):

“After Nick sells me your goddam vampire book, you can go out and buy yourself a new sports car.”

“I don’t need one,” said James with a touch of his usual arrogance. “I’ve already got a cherry 1967 Corvette.”

“Hey, fuck you,” Don said. “I’m talkin’ a brand-new Ferrari, if you don’t blow this deal by pissing me off.” He laid an American Express Platinum Card on top of the check, flaunting his superior credit-worthiness. “You’re a complete fucking outsider in this town, but I can be your ticket in. When I say I want something, the deal gets done. And today I’ve just decided the movies *need* more writers like you. You can thank me later.”

“Okay then,” James said.

Is it any wonder that he returned to Cambria more ego-bloated than ever?

My own celebrity encounters seemed to have the opposite effect. I was swept up in a tidal wave of bad karma, becoming involved in a series of small-scale disasters that would have seemed almost comical if they hadn’t packed such an emotional wallop.

To this day, I don’t know why our paths diverged so markedly, but I suspect it might have had something to do with our respective attitudes. I generally saw the rich and famous as rapacious narcissists, dangerous to be around. But James wanted to live as one of them – and, with Rina’s help, he was on a fast track to achieving that lifestyle.

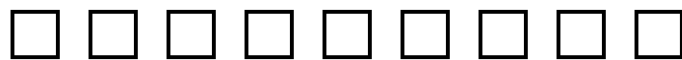
Sometimes it was hard for me not to wonder who was making the better choices. James seemed to be dealing himself a far superior hand, although in my Esalen days I’d

often heard it said that whenever you get something that pleases your ego, you've usually traded away something important to your soul. But maybe that was just spiritual sour grapes. As the enigmatic German novelist B. Traven wrote:

"Morals are taught and preached not for the sake of heaven, but to assist those people on earth who have everything they need and more to retain their possessions and to help them accumulate still more. Morals is the butter for those who have no bread."

Perhaps there was some symbolic significance to the fact that I had my first unlucky encounter with William Randolph Hearst Junior right after I'd eaten a buttery stack of Double-D's sourdough pancakes. Once again, for the third or fourth time since I'd met Double-D, I found myself wondering if he was just an innocent shepherd of coincidences or the agent of a mind-fucking conspiracy masquerading as the fickle finger of fate.

Although I didn't know it at the time, my encounter with the Hearsts would result in the last interview to be published in my *Cambria Treasures* series. It would also inadvertently bring about the end of the *Cambria Insurrectionist*.



**"WE HOLD THAT THE GREATEST RIGHT
IN THE WORLD IS THE RIGHT TO BE
WRONG"**

- William Randolph Hearst

So I'm signing my check for breakfast at the Cambria Pines Bar and Grill when the friendly fry cook informs me that William Randolph Hearst Junior and his wife, Austine, have just occupied a booth beneath the old film poster for Citizen Kane. Suddenly I'm faced with an existential crisis as I stand there digesting my sourdough pancakes: Should I risk public humiliation by asking the mighty Hearsts for an interview while they're eating lunch, or resign myself to the solid week of self-loathing sure to come if I don't make the most of the opportunity?

As usual, I opt for the risk of public humiliation. I am, after all, the Creative Director of the Cambria Insurrectionist.

And so, wearing ratty sneakers and a black cardigan sweater full of holes, I present myself at the Hearst's table. My frantic but passably eloquent introduction intrigues Mr. Hearst enough to get him to look at the Year-in-Review issue of the Insurrectionist that I have along with me. His first words to me are: "I can't tell if you're a boy or a girl."

"He's a young man," Mrs. Hearst says, already my ally in what is to become the most frustrating and embarrassing interview of my career. "He writes and takes pictures for this paper."

"Do you own it?" Mr. Hearst asks me. A reasonable question for a Hearst, I suppose.

"No, I don't own it," I say, "but I've been a semi-involuntary volunteer for over a year now, so I guess that makes me an investment partner of sorts."

The Hearsts are sufficiently pleased with this answer. They invite me out to their ranch in San Simeon for tea and an interview. We decide to do it on a Tuesday. In the meantime, I will spend the next four days researching the past of the Hearst family in a Rosebud-like quest to discover the legacy William Randolph Hearst left to his namesake son. The major revelation of that quest still puzzles me to this day:

His father built castles; Bill Hearst wants to build Holiday Inns.

A RATHER FAMOUS FATHER: WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST

While William Randolph Hearst was leading a life that inspired eight full-length biographies and provided the role model for Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, William Randolph Hearst Jr. (call him Bill) was growing up spoiled, petulant and bored. As he later said of himself and his four brothers: "We never did a goddam thing. We never worked because we never had to. Believe me, if I ever got a reputation for anything at all, it was only because the rest of them were even worse. It got to the point where they held a parade if one of the Hearst boys bothered to get up in the morning."

William Randolph Hearst, like his sons to follow, might have considered himself too rich to be ambitious. Born on April 29th, 1863, to George Hearst, a miner who got lucky (he plunked down \$450 dollars for a one-sixth interest in the Comstock silver mine), and Phoebe Apperson Hearst, a woman

with strong interests in the arts, education and charity (an estimated \$21 million passed through her hands to benefit those three categories), WRH initially assumed the role of playboy. He raised hell at home and abroad, chased women, and was eventually kicked out of Harvard in his junior year for distributing "Thunder Mugs" to the faculty.

(A "Thunder Mug," my research revealed, was a personalized chamber pot with a caricature of each faculty member's face at the bottom where the "night soil" - to use a Shakespearean turn of phrase - would be deposited.)

After a brief post-college stint as a reporter for Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, WRH felt ready to assume some responsibility. He wrote a letter to his father asking for control of the *Daily Examiner* in San Francisco, then the least distinguished of nine newspapers in that city, a struggling rag George Hearst had won several years earlier in partial payment of a gambling debt. "I am possessed of the weakness which at some time or other of their lives pervades most men," WRH wrote, "I am convinced that I could run a newspaper successfully."

His father eventually gave him the paper, and on the evening of March 3rd, 1887, a twenty-three-year-old William Randolph Hearst walked into the ramshackle offices at Market Street and Grant Avenue and went to work.

Young WRH proved to have a genius for newspapering. With his talents and a healthy dose of his father's money, the renamed *San Francisco Examiner* became a major contender. Flush with

success and financial backing from his mother, WRH bought the *New York Journal* in 1895 at the age of 32. In 1898, he goaded the U.S. into the Spanish-American War (some might recall his famous cable to staff artist Frederic Remington in Cuba: "You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war"). In 1902, he was elected to congress from New York.

On April 28th, 1903, on the eve of his 40th birthday, WRH married Millicent Veronica Wilson in a half-assed effort to become a family man. He spawned five sons before he took up with a young starlet named Marion Davies and hired Julia Morgan in 1919 to build a "bungalow" in San Simeon.

He was a man of many grand and madcap passions. At the height of his career, WRH owned 28 newspapers in 19 cities, 14 U.S. magazines (and two in England), 11 radio stations, five news services and one movie company. It cost him more than \$100 million a year to produce all his publications, he employed over 38,000 people, and it was said that one American family out of every four read a Hearst newspaper or magazine.

At one time he also owned over two million acres of real estate: a million acre cattle ranch in Chihuahua, Mexico, known as "The Babicora"; the castle on 275,000 acres in San Simeon which he called "La Cuesta Encantada"; 67,000 acres named "Wyntoon" on the McCloud River in Northern California; 1,300 acres in Great Britain upon which resided 800-year-old St. Donat's Castle; the Clarendon Apartments in New York; a Spanish Cloister here, an historic

farmhouse there, and to get away from it all, a Santa Monica beach home equipped with fifty bathrooms.

He was an eclectic and obsessive collector of art, amassing collections that were said to be outstandingly good in 20 categories and the best in the world among private collectors in five categories: Silver, Armor, English Furniture, Gothic Tapestries, and Hispano-Moresque Pottery. He had two Bronx warehouses, each five stories high, which were filled to the rafters with art and antiques, in addition to the treasures housed in San Simeon.

WRH died in Marion Davies' home in Beverly Hills on August 14th, 1951, at the age of 88. His will, 125 pages, was the longest ever filed in California. It left a small trust to his five sons (it worked out to about \$30,000 a year for each of them until the mid-'70s) and deliberately kept control of the Hearst empire out of his family's hands. The bulk of his estate - \$43,743,407 - was left to the William Randolph Hearst Foundation for charitable purposes.

It was quite a life. In his later years, WRH wrote a newspaper column that recounted his adventures as a young boy - Little Willie. In one column, he recalled that his boyhood career goal was to earn his livelihood at piracy. "Willie never realized his ambition to be a pirate," WRH wrote, "but he got to be a newspaperman, which is in the same general category."

* * *

The history of the great newspaper and magazine tycoons is a history of megalomania:

- Joseph Pulitzer thought his New York World "should be more powerful than the President." He even thought it should have some influence over inhabitants of other planets. He considered erecting a billboard in New Jersey that would be visible on Mars, and was dissuaded only after one of his employees asked, "What language shall we print it in?"

- James Gordon Bennett, owner of the New York Herald, had a reputation for being amazingly arrogant about his great wealth. Once, while he interviewed a young man for a job on his Paris Herald, he took a wad of thousand-franc notes out of his back pocket and threw it onto the fire. The startled young man leapt from his chair and saved the notes from burning. "Give them to me! That's where I want them to be!" Bennett roared - and he hurled the money back into the flames.

- William Randolph Hearst, as we already know, thought he could furnish an occasional war.

They were a hard-nosed and cynical group, these media tycoons. They, and the editors they hired to run their publications, had little stomach for human kindness, or even common courtesy. There are countless stories of how they put their cub reporters through hellish psychological abuse in perverse "tests" of their mettle. If the reporters could stand the heat, they often went on to become first-rate journalists. Those who buckled often went on to become first-rate chicken vivisectionists or Buick salesmen, but they were rarely seen in print again.

William Randolph Hearst Jr., I later realized, was familiar with the above scenario, and had probably acted it out on more than one occasion in his eighty years. That he acted it out with me needs hardly to be said. What we engaged in out on the ranch in San Simeon was not so much an interview as it was a contest of wills....

THE CANTANKEROUS INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM RANDOPH HEARST JR.

“Did you say pilot or pirate?” Bill Hearst grumbled at me over tea.

I had asked him if he saw the similarity between piracy and journalism. I read his father’s words to him again.

“Pirate? No, I don’t see the connection....” *Harumph, humph.* Next question, please.

I was having a difficult time with Mr. Hearst. Not only was he hard of hearing, he was also decidedly against answering any of my questions in anything but the most cursory way. I asked him about his Pulitzer Prize. He couldn’t remember when he’d won it – or why.

“We went over and talked to the Russians. They gave us the prize in ‘54 or so – I’m not sure.”

(The Hearst Task Force booked a few rooms in Moscow’s National Hotel on January 25th, 1955. There, Hearst and newsmen Frank Conniff and J. Kingsbury Smith interviewed several top Russian officials, including then First Secretary of the Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev. The interviews

won the team the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting in 1956.)

Hearst was much more interested in talking about the *Cambria Insurrectionist*, which he called a “slick little sheet.” So I told him we have a core staff of four people who work sixteen-hour days without getting paid. I suggested we were closer in spirit to the newspapers of an earlier generation, when hard-drinking cynics perpetually pursued local “scoops,” although we were all too poor to drink much and I, personally, was trying to become more whimsical than cynical (although I seem to be slipping this week...). Hearst was amused, and his wife, Austine, beamed, but that didn’t make the rest of the interview any easier.

“And what are you up to these days, Mr. Hearst?” I asked.

“To tell you the truth, I’m less active.” He told me he kept an eye on the newspapers and generally started work on his weekly Sunday column on Wednesday or Thursday with a little help from Joe Kingsbury Smith.

I asked him to tell me a bit about what journalism was like in his younger days, mentioning that when he turned twenty-eight – just a few years older than myself – he was already President of the *New York American*.

“At fifteen,” Hearst recalled, “I sat at Pop’s feet and tried to learn everything I could from him. At twenty I married a girl from Piedmont. Later, I went to work for the *American*. I spent a year as a reporter in City Hall, and a year in police headquarters...” Hearst

claimed to have worked his way “from the ground up” doing rewrites for a time, slaving away in the same office as then publisher, Edmund Coblentz. “I think I was made publisher in the later ‘30’s,” he said, “but I’m not going to sit here and give you a damn chronology.”

Actually, Hearst went from cub reporter to publisher in a span of three years (1933 to 1936). I asked him what it was like to work alongside some of the great journalists of that time, like Damon Runyon.

“Sure, I remember Damon. He wrote sports.”

Damon Runyon, one of the most colorful writers of a very colorful era, the man who once led an article on Al Capone’s trial with the line: “Al Capone was quietly dressed this morning, except for a hat of pearly white, emblematic, no doubt, of purity.”

Damon Runyon wrote sports?

Bill Hearst has been a journalist for over fifty years. He knows what makes a good interview. This wasn’t one of them. I asked for anecdotes. He refused to supply any.

At about that time, the Hearst’s dog – a stout little terrier named Stonewall Jackson III – started barking very persistently at our feet. Hearst commanded Jackson to shut up. Jackson refused to do so, and my interview for the day was over (I had been invited to return for photos of the Hearsts on horseback the following morning). On my way out the door, Hearst yelled to me in anger, “Throw Jackson in the fire!”

Although I didn't take the request seriously, I couldn't help but wonder what had happened to Stonewall Jackson I and II.

* * *

Like it or not, the Hearst family has had a significant influence on the Cambria/San Simeon area for well over 100 years now (some don't like it at all - local ranchers have gone so far as to write into their wills that upon their death, their land was under no circumstance to be sold to the Hearsts). The Hearst mercury mines brought many of Cambria's earliest settlers here. Hearst Castle - which the Hearsts gladly donated to the state of California, thinking it to be a gigantic white elephant - has been an amazingly successful tourist attraction from the first day it opened to the public in 1958. It now draws approximately one million people to San Simeon every year.

Those people supply a large portion of the income in our tourist-based economy. Furthermore, Hearst Castle employs many people at wages substantially higher than can be found for similar work locally. But the state government is to be thanked for those two boons to our community, not the current generation of Hearsts.

At present, the Hearsts pay more in property taxes than any other family in San Luis Obispo County. In the October 23rd, 1989 issue of Forbes magazine, Bill Hearst and his brother, Randolph, were estimated to be worth nearly two billion dollars. Forbes ranked five members of the Hearst family among the 400 richest people in the world.

(By the way, the wealth of those 400 individuals on the Forbes list now equals the savings that all other Americans have in commercial banks. But don't worry... according to the Reagan theory of trickle-down economics, people like the Hearsts are going to trickle on us and we're going to like it so much that we'll be begging them for more. Hasn't happened yet, but Reagan was only in office for what... eight years? These things take time.)

In the mid-'70s, the Hearst family regained control of the family fortune when the Hearst Corporation was able to buy back the stock of the William Randolph Hearst Foundation. The outcome of this complex transaction is that the family now divides approximately ten percent of the corporation's annual net, which last year approached \$300 million – and not a dime of it any longer has to go to charity, as old WRH intended.

Since 1979, when Frank Bennack became chief executive officer, the Hearst Corporation has shelled out more than \$1.5 billion to acquire and develop new businesses (recent acquisitions include the Houston Chronicle and Esquire magazine). The company is doing fine financially (net worth is estimated at \$3.75 billion), but it seems to be suffering from Donald Trump Syndrome: it wants more, More, MORE. The latest – and according to Forbes: “potentially most lucrative” – moneymaking scheme is to develop a five-stage project of hotels and tourist stores in San Simeon over the next ten to fifteen years. It's a project that has environmentalists up in arms, but as Bill Hearst

made vividly clear to me in our interview, environmentalists and others of their ilk won't be having much say in the matter.

It's time for San Simeon to turn a profit.

THE RAPE OF SAN SIMEON POINT

Bill and Austine Hearst spend most of the year at their Fifth Avenue home in Manhattan, but they get out to San Simeon "as often as possible." Holidays and the odd long weekend are spent in the little cottage they've staked out for themselves on the family ranch just past Pico Creek. They stayed at Hearst Castle in the "A" guesthouse until the mid-'70s when, according to Hearst, "Jerry Brown and the Chairman of the Parks Commission... formed up a little thing between them. They got up a pretext that they wanted another tour." He seemed bitter that the castle - owned by the state and maintained at taxpayer expense - was no longer his personal playground.

In our second interview, I told Mr. Hearst I was bitter that San Simeon Point - owned by his family and maintained at their expense - was no longer to be *my* personal playground.

Of the five stages of the Hearst Corporation's development plan for San Simeon, Stage Three seems to bother everyone the most: the proposed 250-unit motel on San Simeon Point. The Point - a forested peninsula above San Simeon Cove - is dearly loved by many local nature enthusiasts, some

of whom consider it the most beautiful piece of real estate on the Central Coast. It's one of those places that, once visited, can never be forgotten.

But that doesn't mean the Hearst Corporation won't bulldoze it. I asked Bill Hearst what was going on.

"The Coastal Commission held us up from doing anything," he griped.

(Wrong. The Coastal Commission wrote the five-stage project into the Local Coastal Plan, which, in effect, allows a variance in the Ag/Open Space designation of the Hearst's 77,000 acres.)

After harping on the Coastal Commission a bit more, Hearst explained that they intend to "put something like the Holiday Inn out there - a first-class operation."

All I could muster in response was a hollow, "Oh."

Hearst explained that the state of California has long been making money hand over fist at Hearst Castle, and now it's his family's turn to get "a piece of the action." He admitted that their original plans - which called for a golf course and many more motel units - might have been "too ambitious." In a fine pantomime of contrition, he said, "I don't want to develop the ranch like that, and I don't think the family does, either."

But why develop the ranch in the first place? It's not as if the Hearsts need the money. If it's the property taxes they're worried about, they could make good use of the Williamson Agricultural Trust Act, which - in exchange for the Hearst's promise not to develop the land for the next twenty years - would reduce

their property taxes to a fraction of the present amount.

Rather than discuss these options with me, however, Bill Hearst started telling old war stories.

He was a correspondent in World War II, hobnobbing with generals in Italy and France, until a cut on his finger gave him blood poisoning and he had to go home. Since then, he has traveled the world "several times" and met with kings and queens, shahs and prime ministers, and lesser celebrities of every imaginable sort. He has been the buddy to our Presidents ("Nixon and LBJ in particular") and has stories of clowning around with the Kennedys down in Palm Beach. Many think of him as the Hearst Corporation's ambassador to the world, but as he rambled on, it occurred to me that his father's comparison of piracy to journalism was essentially correct – provided one inherits enough money.

Bill Hearst had a few words of advice for me at the conclusion of our interview. "You should cut that hair," he said; "someone might mistake you for a faggot."

Thanks, Bill. I'll keep that in mind.

* * *

Not many people know that the Hearsts haven't legally established The Cove and San Simeon Point as exclusively their property. The fence that borders the area, with its many No Trespassing signs, may be illegal. Fifteen years ago, the public had unlimited access to The Cove and The Point; it is

only recently that the fences and the signs have made nature walks by the common folk seem forbidden.

As of a few weeks ago, a bulldozer and three skip loaders have been hard at work denuding the landscape within the perimeter of San Simeon Point. Five to ten acres have been cleared - and it all may have been done without the proper permits.

According to sources in the County Planning Commission, a Hearst "family member" who recently visited the area gave orders for the bulldozing to go ahead. I left a message on Bill Hearst's answering machine in New York, asking him to comment. I'm still waiting for him to return the call.

THE GREAT HEARST HOPE: WILLIAM RANDOPH HEARST III

In retrospect, I'm surprised Bill Hearst allowed me to interview him at all (he probably is, too, upon reading this far...). His weekly columns reflect a mean-spirited conservatism that even Methodists and Rotarians might find a trifle extreme. Certainly he couldn't have expected to find a kindred spirit in an impoverished, impertinent, improperly-haired photojournalist such as myself. But such clashes of attitudes and ideals are becoming evermore common in the Republican-dominated '80s, where the rich have been getting richer and the poor have been getting poorer for quite some time now. What's amusing is that Hearst's views clash not only with the odd mongrel reporter in Cambria, but also with

the writers sharing the editorial pages with him in his flagship newspaper, the *San Francisco Examiner*. For instance, not too long ago Bill Hearst wrote a tribute to Ronald Reagan that ended: "It is particularly gratifying to me that I recommended this remarkable man for President and supported him strongly and consistently throughout his Presidency." A few months earlier, Christopher Matthews' column (which runs directly beneath Hearst's) led off with this quirky paragraph:

"Ronald Reagan is a charmer. So are most deadbeats. Having tripled the national debt in eight extravagant years, he still acts the part of young Jefferson Smith, the cleanest maverick just off the train. His Technicolor Presidency has gone \$2 trillion over budget and he still portrays himself as the most tight-fisted buckaroo ever to hit the big city...."

The pioneer of gonzo journalism, Hunter S. Thompson, who also contributes a weekly column to the *Examiner*, once summed up Reagan even more succinctly: "For the last twenty years (Reagan) has functioned brilliantly as the flag-waving front man for a gang of fast-buck California profit-takers who no longer need him."

Who is responsible for this disparity in the editorial opinions of the *Examiner*?

Most of the credit goes to William Randolph Hearst III.

Yes, William Randolph Hearst III (call him Will) is Bill Hearst's son. Born in 1949, Will Hearst is "the off-shoot, the scion, the golden boy in a family that had

almost stopped hoping for a strong and serviceable heir..." (Chaney and Cieply, *The Hearsts: Family and Empire - The Later Years*).

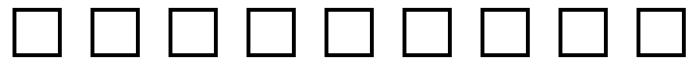
He was the first male Hearst in three generations to earn a college degree (Mathematics, Harvard '72). At his family's insistence, he sat on the Hearst Corporation's board of directors and took his licks as a reporter for the *Examiner* until 1976, when he tired of corporate politics and went to work with his friend, Jann Wenner, publisher of *Rolling Stone*. The two of them started up *Outside* magazine. When *Outside* moved from San Francisco to New York some two years later, Will Hearst returned to the family fold. He was made editor and publisher of the *Examiner* by late 1984.

In an extraordinary show of ambition that might have made his grandfather proud, Will Hearst has since transformed the *Examiner* from a mediocre, slightly reactionary rag into one of the most innovative newspapers around, modeling it after the *Washington Post* and *Boston Globe* for its local and international news, and radically improving its feature writing, columns, and arts coverage by hiring the very best (and most eccentric) talent currently to be had. There is rampant speculation that Will Hearst may be *the* Hearst, the heir of venerable old WRH who returns the family to the status it held in its glory years.

In a television spot for the *Examiner* that ran a few years back, Will Hearst sat in his office speaking with the ghost of his grandfather:

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing, Will?”
the ghost asked.

“I don’t know...” Will replied. “Did you?”



We experienced some unanticipated fallout from my Hearst article. Breaking the news that the Hearsts wanted to build a Holiday Inn on San Simeon Point set off a series of public protests from local environmentalists. The California Coastal Commission chose to listen to them. In the following month, the Commission announced that the Hearst project was going back into review.

The Hearsts couldn’t have been pleased. Their lawyers had become subscribers to our newspaper while I was writing the article, but in the end, they couldn’t touch us; I had been careful not to write anything that might lead to a lawsuit. Our local merchants, however, were free to retaliate in any way they saw fit. Many of them pulled their ads from the *Insurrectionist* in the following weeks, citing the Hearst article as the reason. Staunch Republicans, for the most part, they had wanted the extra tourist revenue that would have come from a big hotel complex on the Point. They didn’t give a damn about the environmental consequences, or the plain fact that the Cambria/San Simeon area didn’t have enough water to support those new hotels and swimming pools that the Hearsts were planning. (We were already facing a building moratorium because of summer droughts and there was a five-year waiting list for new water permits that was only growing longer.) That sort of long-term thinking never even seemed to enter the minds of the merchants who’d pulled their ads;

they no doubt identified themselves with the Hearsts as short-term profiteers, shitting in their own nests for the sociopathic sake of piling up a bigger retirement nest egg.

Or maybe the Hearsts had pressured them into pulling their ads. Unlike Skeeze, I didn't think the Hearst family had aliens doing security work for them, but I was suspicious enough to wonder if they had Mafia-like ties to the Cambria business community. If they did, however, I never saw any direct evidence of it.

Three weeks after the Hearst article, Bitsey Metcalf informed us that we had lost about a third of our advertising revenue. She knew better than any of us that the *Insurrectionist* was dying. She started talking about how she'd always wanted to take an extended trip to Australia – six months in the company of kangaroos and wombats sounded about right to her. When I mentioned that the thought of her leaving was making me depressed, Bitsey cheerfully offered to give me a blowjob in the darkroom to perk me back up. The glint in her eye gave me an instant boner, but I thought she was only joking, so I laughed and didn't take her up on it.

A week later she booked a one-way ticket on a flight to Sydney. Skinny little Bitsey... I really did end up missing her. We'd had some good times together at The Sow's Ear. That blowjob offer continued to haunt me. Could I have saved the *Insurrectionist* if I'd started having sex with her? I didn't think so (I had a hard time imagining that my penis could be that persuasive), but sometimes I wondered. In a strange way, I felt like I'd let Nora down.

Faced with the choice again, I would have gladly banged Bitsey for the sake of continuing our free press experiment in Cambria – but I couldn't see myself ever becoming

enough of a hypocrite to cozy up to someone like Bill Hearst.



In the aftermath of the Hearst debacle, I started exploring Buckthorn Manor in earnest. The money that Skeeze had entrusted to me to pay for the rats' goat milk and *tacos con queso* had finally run out. He'd been missing for over a year. During that time, the Berlin Wall had fallen; a duplicitous former Director of Central Intelligence, George Herbert Walker Bush, had become the 41st President of the United States. I was now faced with the prospect of either finding more money squirreled away somewhere in the Manor, or feeding the rats out of my own pocket. My hope was that Skeeze had left behind a secret stash. Nora could no longer afford to pay me and I didn't think I could keep the rats well fed for long before I started running out of my own meager funds.

Twenty gallons of goat milk and several hundred *tacos con queso* per month *es muy expensive-o*.

I'd already scrutinized every inch of Skeeze's basement. It looked like a team of obsessive-compulsive janitors had swept through it. There wasn't even a single sprig of marijuana left to be found. Even the stainless steel sink looked freshly scrubbed, with a brand new bar of Lava soap placed by the faucet in anticipation of the next hapless germaphobe to shake Skeeze's hand after one of his *porn siestas*. On the other side of the room, the doors of the candy apple red Snap-On tool storage locker had been left wide open. Its shelves were empty. Aside from the banks of grow lights, there was little to indicate that the basement

had once been the scene of a thriving hydroponic marijuana growing operation. Evidently, the plan to eliminate all incriminating evidence had been carried out with firm resolve.

The parlor floor was much the same story, although it was a little less neat due to the rats constantly scurrying in and out. Cans of soup and refried beans were neatly stacked in the kitchen cupboards, but I didn't find any cookie jars stuffed with hundred dollar bills, or ceramic piggy banks containing the rats' rainy day fund. I couldn't even find any loose change under the cushions of the buttoned leather sofa in front of the TV. I did, however, find several stiff, flattened wads of Kleenex that I picked up with fireplace tongs and deposited in the garbage.

The only place I hadn't explored thoroughly was the third floor. Most of the rooms up there had been ruined by rain years ago when Buckthorn Manor's partially renovated roof had collapsed and Lord Buckthorn hadn't had the funds to make proper repairs. Later, the holes had been patched over with plywood and tarpaper, but the water damage had never been cleaned up. Room after room featured moldering William Morris wallpaper, piles of leaf litter in the corners, and windowsills furred with dust and tiny dead spiders. In one of those rooms, I knew, Lord Buckthorn had emblazoned his moth-eaten tuxedo with Chinese fireworks and hurled himself from a window onto the Rotary Club's pancake griddle three stories below in the central courtyard. Maybe that's why Skeeze had left the Manor's third floor trashed and rotting: he didn't want to risk running into the ghost of his flamboyantly narcissistic grandfather.

Since it was the last place left to look for hidden cash, I climbed to the top landing of the creaky wooden staircase, determined to open every door and rummage through every closet. The long corridors I found there were eerily silent, lined with badly warped mahogany paneling and skuzzy wool carpets in a maroon-and-gold fleur-de-lis pattern. In every direction I turned, the cloying funk of rat shit thickened the air. Apparently, the rats had chosen to make the third floor their indoor bathroom, although I didn't see any of them about. Blackened clumps of capsule-shaped rat droppings made it unpleasant to walk around, whereas the rest of the Manor was surprisingly turd-free.

I was just starting down the western corridor when I was startled by a loud thump directly behind me. With a lurching heart, I spun around and found bandit-masked Señor Pepe behind me. He had just dropped off the stairway's balustrade to join me in my explorations. The heavy-bellied raccoon crept past me and then, glancing over his hairy gray shoulder, padded ahead like an amiable dog out for a stroll with his master. I felt compelled to follow him.

I turned the dull brass knob on the first door that we came to. It opened with a foul exhalation. Inside was a little boy's bedroom in an advanced state of decomposition. If Skeeze had spent his own childhood sleeping there, he must have abandoned it long ago. A stuffed Winnie-the-Pooh bear peppered with mildew slumped sideways on a high shelf. A beanbag chair in the shape of a giant, crushed velour football sprouted gills of orange fungus from its sides. A shredded nest of Dr. Seuss books splayed open on the floor actually had a small green tree growing out of it – a maple, judging by its leaves. A jagged hole in the roof

revealed a glimpse of sunlight and blue sky right above the Seussian-rooted tree. Not every hole in the roof had been patched, after all. I was grateful for the fresh air.

A low dresser over by the window sat with its drawers spilled open. Señor Pepe went over to it, sniffing loudly. I watched as he reached into a drawer with his uncannily humanoid forepaws and emerged with a clutch of fabric that turned out to be a toddler's pair of red denim OshKosh overalls. Señor Pepe reared back on his haunches with the overalls' saggy suspenders delicately held between his little black hands, as if to say, *"What do you think? Does this look like something I could wear? Or will it make me look fat?"*

I noticed there was a brass-buttoned flap in back of the miniature overalls, perfect for the accommodation of a diaper – or a raccoon's bushy ringed tail. I bent down near Señor Pepe and asked him if he wanted to put the overalls on. I'd never been so close to a raccoon before. When Señor Pepe curled his black lips and bared his jagged teeth, I wasn't sure if he was trying to smile or scare the shit out of me. But he handed me the pair of overalls with the same delicate aplomb that he'd used to hold them up. Then, when I held out one of the overalls' legs for him to step into, he confidently approached me, grasped the crooked pinkie on my left hand (for balance), and – after two twitching false starts – he stuck his hind paw right in. I was amazed.

Without too much trouble, I helped Señor Pepe get the rest of his raccoon parts into the overalls. With the flap undone in back, they were a perfect fit. When we were finished, Señor Pepe stood on his hind legs admiring himself in the closet door's full-length mirror. He seemed pleased. I'd made a new friend.

Together, we wandered from room to room along the rest of the corridor, hunting through closets, checking under beds. I don't know what I was expecting to find. A briefcase full of gold bars? An old attaché case full of stock certificates? There was nothing like that. Instead, what we found were more mildew-soured carpets, more books with broken spines, more fuzzy grey pillows made of cobwebs and dust, more dilapidated antique furniture with fungus-encrusted upholstery. Whatever man builds up, the future tears down. I was beginning to sense the futility of my endeavor. It was like poking around in a rotten tree stump, hoping to roust a leprechaun.

At the end of the corridor we came to a room that was littered with empty 40-ounce beer bottles (Olde English 800 and Colt 45 Malt Liquor, for the most part) along with a lot of red-and-white Kentucky Fried Chicken buckets. The KFC buckets were full of old gnawed chicken bones and the beer bottles had been stuffed with cigarette butts. The stench of spilt beer and stale cigarette smoke was almost nauseating in its intensity. Either Skeeze had some incredibly foul eating habits or local high school kids had been climbing up the fire escape attached to the Juliet balcony off the end of the Manor's western wing and breaking in to use the room to party.

I went out to the corridor and checked the latch on the Juliet balcony's windows. It was hanging free. I locked it.

Back in the festering party room, I noticed there was a hole in the paneled wall over by the closet. It was about three feet tall and a little less than a foot wide. Señor Pepe might have been able to fit through it, but I certainly couldn't. Something about the hole made me curious. I got down on my hands and knees and peered into it. Near the

entrance, there was nothing to see but scuffed, unfinished floorboards, but toward the back of the dark hole I spied a length of a thick grey rope, just out of reach. My desperate imagination told me the rope might be tied to something valuable. To reach it, I had to turn my head and extend my entire left shoulder into the hole as far as it would go. I couldn't see where I was reaching. The thought of sticking my arm into pure darkness unsettled me. It didn't seem like a smart move. But I patted around until I felt the rope and then, when I grabbed it and pulled -

- *it pulled back.*

I let go and scrambled away from the hole as if I'd just touched a live electrical wire. A split-second later, it occurred to me that I might have grasped a snake. The texture of its skin had certainly felt reptilian. Writhing and reptilian... I shuddered as the sense-memory blazed through me. Señor Pepe approached the hole and growled at whatever was in there. Whatever it was, it didn't come out. I decided we should go someplace else rather than wait around for it to introduce itself.

We half-ran over to eastern wing of the Manor's third floor, all the way to its terminus, as far from the western wing as we could get without going downstairs. For a fat raccoon, Señor Pepe was surprisingly speedy. *So there's a snake in Skeeze's mansion...* I thought to myself. It was probably racking up some horrendous karma if it was feeding on the rats in Karni Mata West. That still didn't explain all the beer bottles and Kentucky Fried Chicken buckets, however.

I had just about given up on my quest for hidden treasure when Señor Pepe and I arrived at a locked door in the eastern wing's corridor. It was the only locked door I'd

found in the entirety of Buckthorn Manor. I contemplated bashing it in with my shoulder or somehow jimmying the lock. But then Señor Pepe reared up on his hindquarters and showed me a mystery: he was holding out an antique silver skeleton key in his tiny black fist. He must have found it in one of the pockets of his red denim overalls. The key's fancy filigreed bow caught a glimmer of light from the window at the end of the corridor. I reached down slowly and Señor Pepe let me take it from him.

It fit perfectly into the keyhole on the locked door. Of course it did... why wouldn't it? I felt like some dopey kid in a Grimm fairy tale.

When I turned the key, the door opened. I was greeted with the funky, long-trapped odors of sex lube and cheap incense. The peacock blue room contained a large, padded massage table surrounded by an elaborate dual video camera set-up with multiple light stands supporting hot lights, soft boxes, and reflectors. My first thought was: *porn set*.

I wasn't far off the mark. On top of an oak filing cabinet in the corner, there was a neat stack of videotapes. They all had the same title: *How To Make Your Lady Squirt!* An instructional video, apparently. I lifted one off the top of the stack to look at the cover. There was Skeeze, flashing a high-voltage, tawny-toothed grin from behind his familiar red beard. He was dressed as a mad scientist - or, more to the point, a deranged massage therapist. Just over his shoulder, a naked woman was stretched out on the massage table with her perfect breasts and blonde bush prominently displayed. The high angle of the shot and the shallow depth-of-field had conspired to blur the model's face into

anonymity, but even so I was almost sure I knew her identity. I'd seen those breasts before.

They belonged to Kayleigh.



I took the videotape with me downstairs and shoved it into the slot of Skeeze's Japanese VCR. Then I sat down on the couch with the remote and turned on his enormous television. I heard a blast of cheesy music, heavy on a heraldic brass section – like something lifted from one of those educational films shot in 16-millimeter during the fifties that we'd had to watch on rainy days in elementary school. The credits rolled over a close-up shot of a glowing, green-jellied lava lamp:

BUCKTHORN PRODUCTIONS PROUDLY PRESENTS
How To Make Your Lady Squirt!

STARRING
Skeeze Lester Huntley
Yoni Fuller

AND INTRODUCING
Miss Felicity Jones!

I didn't know anyone named Felicity Jones, but I was, of course, familiar with the other players. I rightly suspected that Yoni was Kayleigh's porn star name.

There she was in the opening scene, blithely stepping out of her peasant skirt beside the massage table. And there

was Skeeze, seated in the foreground, staring straight into the camera, seemingly unaware of Kayleigh's nubile body behind him. He started talking as if he was having an intimate conversation with his audience, just like Marlin Perkins used to do on "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom" - only in this case Skeeze was wearing a cum-stained, tie-dyed bathrobe instead of a safari jacket:

"Greetings! My name is Skeeze Lester Huntley and today we'll be talking about 'The Art of Creating Orgasms.' By using the patented and scientifically proven orgasm techniques I'll be demonstrating in this video, you too can become a gonadic prodigy - an Orgasm Artist - just like me."

An Orgasm Artist! A compulsive masturbator was more like it....

"I didn't become an Orgasm Artist overnight, of course," Skeeze went on. "When I first began my research over sixteen years ago, I was frustrated by how difficult it was to find good, useful information about the female orgasm. I mean, I looked everywhere: I read books, magazines, technical manuals... but there just wasn't much out there that was helpful. So I had to spend a lot of time feeling my way like a blind man. I went through a lot of trial and error, a lot of sexual experimentation. I also spent a lot of time talking about orgasms. I talked with my girlfriends, with other men's wives who were orgasmic, with doctors, prostitutes... even with attorneys. (Is it legal for a lady to squirt? The answer might surprise you. You can still get arrested for it in Australia, the U.K., and the state of Oklahoma.) I've scrutinized a thousand miles of porn footage like a rabbi with a magnifying glass, looking for

insights into glandular mastery. I did all this so you wouldn't have to.

"Y'know, it's tragic how ignorant most men are, even to this day, when it comes to their lady's sex organs. Many still deny the reality of the female G-spot. And female ejaculation - *squirting!* - that idea scares the bejeezus out of some people (Republicans and evangelistic clergymen, for the most part...). So before we begin, a word of caution: I've found that you have to be very careful about who you share this information with. A lot of people get extremely uptight when you tell them about it - both men *and* women. It can make them feel threatened. And because they feel threatened, those sexually repressed losers can end up causing you a shit-ton of grief. I mean, look at me: I'm just a humble sexologist trying increase human orgasmic potential, but I often get treated like I'm some acid-blooded gnome who goes around bashing in the skulls of baby seals with billy clubs made out of baby dolphins. So now I only share these techniques with people who really want to know about them... people who deliberately seek them out, like you!

"Now, not just any lady can squirt. First and foremost, she'll need a sense of humor. If your lady doesn't have a sense of humor, she's probably not ready for squirting. I'm not being judgmental - that's just the way it is. A sense of humor is one of the best indicators of high self-esteem. And if a lady doesn't have high self-esteem, she'll be too inhibited by fear-based emotions to fire hose her pussy juice all over your face. To clear out all that fear-based emotion, you'll need to build up some trust and do a lot of intensive massage work - a full-on Kundalini Buff - which I'll be demonstrating in the second half of this video. But for now,

let's get right to the good stuff. Let me introduce you to Yoni, who's extremely orgasmic. She'll be helping me demonstrate these exciting new techniques."

Kayleigh, now completely naked, gave a quick, flighty wave to the camera and nervously said, "Hi, y'all...." Skeeze brayed "Hello, Yoni!" in return and asked her to turn around for the camera. As she did so, he pointed out the sexy dimples on each side of Kayleigh's spine above her shapely buttocks. "See those dimples? That's another reliable indicator that your lady has what it takes to squirt. Uptight, out-of-shape women tend not to have them. Now hop up on the table, Yoni, and let's show the audience your muscular vagina."

A hot green flame of jealousy seared through me from my asshole to my earlobes as Skeeze bent over and inserted a greasy clear plastic speculum into Kayleigh's vagina. But what was there to be jealous of? The videotape - professionally edited and packaged - almost certainly had been made before my arrival in Cambria. And although we'd never talked about it, I'd naturally assumed that Kayleigh had been with other men before she met me. *But I never imagined anything like this!*

The camera moved in for a close-up. The speculum had Kayleigh's *yonis* yawning wide open. It was like staring down the throat of a largemouth bass.

"Look! There's the clitoris..." said Skeeze, pointing with his fat monkey fingers. "And this little nozzle here, that's the urethra. That's where Yoni will be ejaculating. The she-jizz comes from para-urethral ducts, or *Skene's glands* - sometimes referred to as the female prostate. It's not pee. Just as men can ejaculate and pee out of the same hole, women can too. And believe me, they know the difference

when they're doing it. Now squeeze your Kegel muscles, Yoni. *Squeeze!*" The speculum bent inward as Kayleigh's vaginal walls contracted in a swallowing motion.

"You see that?" Skeeze enthused. "That's what Kegel exercises can do for you. It's a great way to increase female orgasmic potential. Yoni here does hundreds of Kegels a day. Take a good look at that muscle structure! She could probably bust that speculum right in half, if she felt like it. Just imagine what she could do with a penis inside her."

I didn't have to imagine... *I knew!* Distasteful as it was to think about, I supposed I owed at least a partial debt of gratitude to Skeeze for fostering Kayleigh's astonishing sexual abilities. Best sex of my life, without question.

But I never got her to squirt. Maybe I'm not so hot myself....

The camera went back to a wider angle that showed Skeeze looming over Kayleigh's prone body on the massage table. He poured a thick dollop of oil into his palm from a greasy cup and started rubbing it on both hands. "We're going to be using grapeseed oil for this. It's really good for her skin and her pussy - full of Vitamin E. And it's cheap - only five bucks a gallon. You'll want to use a lot of it when you're applying these techniques, okay? It keeps everything nice and lubricated. You don't want to scuff up your lady's vagina."

Oh god... I was grinding my teeth in anticipation of what was about to come next.

Skeeze removed the speculum and placed his hand on Kayleigh's clitoris. "Okay! Now let's say you're playing with your lady's clit and she has an orgasm. Usually at that point she'll ask you to stop touching her - or if you're eating her

out, she'll smack you on the forehead to get your tongue away from her – because, post-orgasm, her clit has gotten over-sensitive. But one of the things I've discovered is that if you just hold the clitoris without moving, like this, so it doesn't bother her, what tends to happen is that your lady will calm down and then she'll start the cycle all over again and have another orgasm. And another and another...." Kayleigh giggled and twitched beneath Skeeze's hand as if she were on the verge of doing just that.

"But how do we get our ladies to squirt?" Skeeze asked his audience. "That's what we're here for, right? Well, here's what you do. You place one hand here, on your lady's pubic bone, and just press down on it a little. Then you slide your other two middle fingers—these two here..." making the universally recognized sign of the devil, he angled his two middle fingers down toward his palm and then slid them "...right up inside your lady's cooch, like so."

Kayleigh bit her lower lip and spread her legs wider.

"Remember to use plenty of grapeseed oil," Skeeze reminded his viewers. "Now, what comes next might look like I'm being too rough with her, but remember, this is where babies come from. Vaginas are tough and durable. And if I do anything that starts to hurt, she can tell me – just like your lady can tell you, right? So don't get wigged out by this. I'm just going to start moving my two fingers up and down inside there, kind of like I'm fishing the giblets out of a Thanksgiving turkey. See? Don't use your fingernails... just up and down, up and down, up and down... faster now. I know it looks kind of violent, but I'm not hurting her. It feels good, right, Yoni?"

"It feels fuckin' awesome!" Kayleigh said in that distinctive Appalachian accent of hers. Beneath the devilish

ministrations of Skeeze's nimble fingers, there was a slushy *putt-put-putting* sound coming from Kayleigh's vagina that reminded me of a certain bathtub tugboat that I had played with as a boy. I was appalled.

"She's getting close now..." Skeeze announced above the *putt-put-putting*. "You'll feel something inside her swelling up like a little balloon beneath her G-spot. That tells you she's ready. When she's about to cum, it'll push your fingers right out of her. There! Like that!" With a sort of magician's flourish, Skeeze pulled his hand away from Kayleigh's clenching pussy as she let loose with a banshee whoop and commenced squirting. I wanted to turn away from what I was seeing, but I couldn't.

It was an absolute gusher.

Skeeze bent over and held his face directly in the spattering stream, saying, "Ah! A true orgasm!" As Kayleigh's contractions slowed to just a few weak spurts, he added: "You'll learn to savor these like a snifter of fine brandy. There's no finer moment in meat-based life."

Meat-based life! So was Skeeze now a man of spirit, looking down on our puny human lives from transcendent heights? It was bad enough that he was orgasming the piss out of my girlfriend, but was it really necessary for him to rub it in with this swaggering guru act?

At that moment I hated Skeeze. Especially when he plunged his fat fingers right back into Kayleigh's dripping wet *labia minora* and started the whole process over. I was in such a jealous, semi-cuckolded rage that I felt like puking. It was obvious that Kayleigh was enjoying herself. Soon Skeeze had her thrashing and splashing all over the massage table again like a landed tuna. He cradled her trembling thighs with his bathrobe-clad arm and raked his

slobbery lips across her cheek, saying, “This isn’t just from my fingers. It’s all the weeks of massage work leading up to it. Watch... I’ve trained her to keep orgasming just from my kisses!”

Kayleigh giggled and convulsed. I couldn’t stomach any more. I hit the fast-forward button on the remote. The next few orgasms went off like crystalline fireworks displays, or chrysanthemums caught blooming in super-fast motion on some sappy nature show. I kept the videotape speeding along until it arrived at its second half. A title blip over the close-up shot of the sped-up lava lamp read THE KUNDALINI BUFF.

I hit the pause button at the start of the next scene. A new volunteer had taken Kayleigh’s place on the massage table – Miss Felicity Jones, as I recalled from the opening credits. But with all that red hair, I knew at once that her real name wasn’t Felicity:

It was Francesca.

OBE-201: LOVE AND LOOSH

No human being aspires to a life without love, even though love – and its horny offshoot, lust – has caused more trouble for humans than just about any other earthly pursuit. Of course, there will always be a small minority of humans who want to be loved without loving in return – which would seem to solve quite a few problems, if you’re a narcissist or a psychopath pledged to the Dark Brotherhood – but the Beatles told everyone how that equation balances out in the end:

“...the love you take is equal to the love you make.”

That’s essentially the way it works, except it’s a bit more complicated from our side of the astral fence, knowing as we do that love is the highest form of Loosh.

Does the love-infused Loosh you take to the Other Side equal the Loosh you made on Earth? Well, it would (after accounting for egregore handling fees) if it weren’t for all the assholish Archons swarming around like a plague of corporate lawyers making raids on public funds.

Let’s use Gordon’s life to illustrate:

Gordon was born to an emotionally distant father and a borderline psychotic, pill-popping mother, so he didn’t experience much love as a child. As a result, he wasn’t able to generate much in the way of high-quality Loosh. His best early Loosh output occurred during companionable

moments with his basset hound, Samantha – whom he briefly considered marrying around his seventh birthday.

(By the way, the egregore between a boy and his dog is one of the most beneficial egregores on Earth. To continue with the egregore-as-financial-institution analogy, it's like working with an altruistic community credit union rather than being exploited by one of the rapacious, transnational banks. That's why dogs make such great pets – they immediately improve the quality of your life in both this world and the next. That's also why dogs get such a bad rap in the Bible – they're on the side of the True God, as opposed to Jehovah, that Demiurge pretender, with all his Archon-favoring rules and jealous rages. There are some very good reasons why dog is the semordnilap of god in your upside down world.)

Not long after Gordon hit puberty, his Loosh output became prodigious. That wasn't because Gordon had suddenly learned how to love. Far from it. Gordon, simply, had been overcome by adolescent lust.

Love and lust lie on the same continuum in regard to Loosh production, with lust having a negative spin to it and love skewing positive. But either one can produce emotional turmoil – and therefore Loosh – in abundance. Most sexual encounters produce Loosh infused with a mixture of both. Adolescents, creative visionaries (a broad category), and sex addicts tend to produce the largest quantities of this particular brand of Loosh. The more lust there is in the mix, the more the Archons like it.

(Archons, it should be noted, don't care much for love-infused Loosh. Sure, they'll use it in a pinch, to avoid reincarnation, but they prefer the gamier psychic flavors of

Loosh produced by fear and suffering and sexual perversion.)

By the time he turned thirteen, Gordon happened to qualify as both an adolescent and a budding creative visionary with an outrageously fecund imagination – and full access to his father’s hidden cache of Playboys and Penthouses from the early seventies. Soon he was imagining having sex with almost every woman he encountered. On the astral level, all that pent-up lust was translating into a potent build-up of Loosh. And gobs of that Loosh came up for grabs every time Gordon jerked off.

Each and every human orgasm is accompanied by a corresponding astral burst of Loosh. Like a discharge of static electricity, that Loosh-burst can arc from one person to another. That’s why men so often feel exhausted after sex and just want to go to sleep, while many women feel energized and chatty. The phenomenon isn’t exactly reciprocal because men are more outwardly directed with their orgasms, while women tend to think of theirs as originating from within (although that’s subject to change if Skeeze has his way and turns all the world’s women into squirters).

More to the point, when an orgasm results from masturbation the Loosh-burst is ungrounded, so it can go flying off anywhere. For any passing egregore, it’s like finding free money floating in the air. In fact, there’s a special sub-category of egregores (known to some cultures as hungry ghosts) that have taken on trifling lives of their own by doing nothing more than lapping up all the spilled Loosh from inside peep show booths, massage parlors, whorehouses, college dorms, and basically any teenage

male's bedroom with a computer and high-speed access to Internet porn.

Hungry ghost egregores are parasitical in nature. They like to attach themselves to adolescents who've demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for generating Loosh (which partially explains why so many serious cases of mental illness begin in adolescence, and also why poltergeists usually strut their psychic stuff around angry teenagers - there's just more psychic energy there to draw on). Once attached, a hungry ghost egregore can be hard to shake loose. It's like a remora hitching a ride on a pimply swordfish - only this particular remora is invisible and operates outside linear notions of space and time, so it can influence the thoughts and behavior of its host.

Gordon has one. James and Skeeze have them, too. So does Kayleigh, for that matter. They're far more common than you might think.

Under his hungry ghost egregore's synchronistic sway, Gordon has found that his spontaneous erections often act like divining rods, pointing him toward the nearest opportunity for an orgasm. But he's sometimes able to resist those galvanizing calls to action (witness his demurral when Bitsey Metcalf offered him a blowjob). As a result, his parasitical co-pilot is looking to move on. Skeeze, on the other hand, has made a career out of following the proddings of his own sex-hungry egregore (but at least he operates a little higher up on the love-lust continuum than most...).

At a lecture Gordon attended at Esalen, the writer Colin Wilson referred to hungry ghost egregores as mind vampires. As a description, that's not far off the mark. Wilson said he believed the Marquis de Sade had been

under their influence when he wrote his books, which were intended to “add to the mental confusion of the human race, deliberately to distort and pervert the truth about sex.” Similar motives are behind contemporary bestsellers about innocent young women falling in love with vampires and fabulously wealthy sadists. (Watch for James’ own Vampirism Made Easy to follow that soul-degrading trend, depicting the lives of vampires as frolicsome and fun.)

Anything that furthers the Archon agenda on Earth is usually well rewarded. The world of corporate media creates and promotes celebrities who encourage people to behave in ways that make it easy to harvest Loosh from them. In Colin Wilson’s words again, from his book, The Mind Parasites:

“The mind vampires always chose the most intelligent men as their instruments, because it is ultimately the intelligent men who have the greatest influence on the human race. Very few artists have been powerful enough to hurl them off, and such men have gained a new strength in doing so—Beethoven is clearly an example; Goethe another.

“And this explains precisely why it is so important for the mind vampires to keep their presence unknown, to drain man’s lifeblood without his being aware of it. A man who defeats the mind vampires becomes doubly dangerous to them, for his forces of self-renewal have conquered. In such cases, the vampires probably attempt to destroy him in another way—by trying to influence other people against him.”

There are, in fact, hungry ghost egregores—or mind vampires—for just about every form of addictive behavior known to man. Wilson later speculated that they might be symbionts—psychoid entities that challenge evolving hosts to become more conscious of them so the hosts can cope with the threats to their survival on the next quantum evolutionary level. True enough, we would say, provided you keep in mind that for most people that quantum evolution doesn't happen until the moment of their meat-death.

The only way to be free of hungry ghost egregores is to become indifferent to the addictions they so routinely proffer. And you'll want to be free of them, eventually. (We're reminded here of the famous petition from Augustine of Hippo: "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.") You'll want to be free of them because almost all hungry ghost egregores are affiliated with the Archons. Depositing your Loosh with them is like dealing with a bank that's running a Ponzi scheme while laundering money for the Mafia on the side. You might get your money back (usually not without a hassle), or you might show up one day to find the bank has disappeared, taking everything in your accounts along with it.

The ultimate addiction is the soul's enslavement to matter, to the world where you all cling. But for those more mundane situations that stoke the Earth-bound addict's longing in you, it's always helpful to remember the words of William S. Burroughs: "...the con man needs the Mark — The Mark does not need the con man." Burroughs, of all people, would know.

The Archons need your Loosh, but you don't need the Archons.

Act accordingly.

ALPHAVILLE

JEAN-LUC/8864

He insists he never calculated outrage for the sake of outrage—lapses into drag queendom and creepily Germanic overtones being possible exceptions.

...Thrall's raging creations come from a place only Hard truly understands."

THE RELUCTANT SEX TOURIST

So Skeeze wasn't just the wily Dope King of Central California – he was a gentleman pornographer, as well.

As I take my leave of Buckthorn Manor with a videotape of my girlfriend's splashy orgasms in hand, I turn for one last, lingering look at the scene of my sexual humiliation. It's a perfect spring day. Sunlight bounces off the mansion's dusty leaded glass windows. The Chinese Wisteria vines are in full bloom on the portico's two-story Doric columns, their draping purple-blue flower clusters providing a nice contrast with the sea-foam green ceramic shingles on the weather-ravaged mansard roof. It may not be the perfect reproduction of a Venetian palazzo that Lord Buckthorn had intended, but in some ways it's better. Sometimes there's great beauty to be found in ruination.

I wonder what will happen to the Rat Castle now that Skeeze has disappeared. I assume the county will eventually put a lien on it for non-payment of property taxes. Then someday it will probably go up for public auction. In the meantime, someone will need to look after things. I'm no longer mad at Skeeze and I certainly don't hold a grudge against the rats. Despite the squirt tape's time-bomb blow to my ego, I'm still determined to keep the rats properly fed with my own funds. Somehow, I'll come up with the money. My photographs have been selling well in a local gallery called The Vault, located in a former bank building across the street from Old Camozzi's Saloon. To

further supplement my income, I might be able to start shooting weddings on weekends. I've pretty much given up on getting a paycheck from the *Cambria Insurrectionist*, but I plan to keep working there for as long as it exists. I've grown to like being locally famous.

Which reminds me: I'm late for our weekly planning meeting.

The blows to my ego have only just begun.



When I get to the *Insurrectionist's* headquarters, I find Nora at her desk drinking red wine from a paper Dixie cup. Victoria Langley stands beside her arranging slices of Havarti on a cheese tray. Harley and Calliope are nearby, milling about.

"Are we having a party?" I ask as I come through the door. Harley never attends our planning meetings. Something must be up. He's looking grim.

"Hey, there's an idea!" Calliope says brightly. "Maybe we should hold a fundraiser, sell some raffle tickets...."

"You can't fix this with one of your goofy bake sales," Harley says to her, not unkindly.

Nora downs the contents of her Dixie cup and looks up at me from under her silver bangs. "I'm afraid we're going out of business, Gordon."

"What? Why?" I blurt out the words without thinking. I know *exactly* why, of course, but Nora lays it out for me, anyway:

"We've had a nice run, but we don't have the funds to go any further. Our advertising revenue has always been

precarious, at best, and now it seems we're being boycotted by several local merchants."

"That's probably my fault," I admit. "That Hearst article pissed off a lot of people."

"The Hearst piece was certainly scathing - "

"Oh, that's the word for it all right," Calliope breaks in.

"- but Mister Hearst hung himself with his own quotes. His lawyers had no legal recourse, so perhaps they've found other means. Anyway, what's done is done." Nora rises up from her desk to pour herself another Dixie cup full of cheap Paso Robles Pinot Noir. She also pours a cup for me.

"What we did, we did for the sake of posterity and the cause of independent journalism," Nora says in that Boston Brahmin accent I've grown to love. Together, we raise our cups in a toast. "To the *Cambria Insurrectionist*! A newspaper too good for this world."

"*Huzzah!*" says Harley. I think he's being ironic. I know he's been covering the *Insurrectionist's* financial shortfalls with money from his tree surgery business.

Nora isn't done speechifying: "I'm so going to miss working here. We all had our creative fires turned up so high! We were a wildfire burning out of control, surrounded by a drought-starved landscape of journalistic mediocrity!"

"I think mom's getting a little looped..." Calliope says sotto voce to her husband.

With a flinty toss of her silver bob - like a basset hound shaking off water - Nora drives toward her conclusion: "I, for one, intend to brush off the dust from this provincial, narrow-minded little town and move to Manhattan. Would anyone care to join me?"

Calliope's hand shoots up like an anxious schoolgirl as she shouts, "*Ooooh*, I do, I do! What'll we use for money? Newspaper coupons?"

On Nora's behalf, I raise my middle finger just a few inches from Calliope's freckled nose. We both start cracking up.

"Cheese, anyone?" Victoria Langley asks with middle-aged spinster aplomb.



It doesn't really hit me until I'm on my way home: *I'm out of a job*.

What will I do now?

Nora told me I'd be able to use the *Insurrectionist's* darkroom until the landlord finds a new tenant. So I have that going for me, at least. I can keep making my gallery prints. I'll just have to start buying my own silver gelatin paper and darkroom chemicals.

I can also probably make some money as a photographer-for-hire now that I'm so well known – although the prospect of becoming a wedding photographer doesn't exactly make my soul twitter and trill with delight.

Do it for the rats... I think to myself. Maybe, as a bonus, I'll get lucky with the occasional bridesmaid.

After I park the Jeep in the gravel turnout next to the stairs leading up to my house, I get out and check the mailbox. In with the usual bills and direct mail garbage, there's a personal letter plastered with gaudy foreign stamps. The postmark says it's from Bruxelles. It takes me a moment to realize that means it's from Brussels, the capital

of Belgium. There's a name and a return address written on the back.

It's from Skeeze. *He's alive!* I hope that means Kayleigh and Francesca are with him. I tear open the letter and start to read it right there at the foot of the stairs:

May 8, 1990

Hey Crash,

Maybe you've heard about the wave of black triangle UFOs that have been spotted over Belgium recently. There was even one on March 30th that flew right over the city of Brussels. Hundreds of people saw it. The Belgian Air Force sent two F-16s after it, but they couldn't catch it.

Well, guess what? That was me!

The black triangle dropped me off right in the middle of Grand-Place, which is this big public square surrounded by cool old buildings and the Brussels Town Hall. When I landed on the cobblestones I was totally nude! For some reason, the aliens had to beam me down without my pants on. Luckily, some drunk college guys took pity on me and gave me an overcoat. Then they made me get wasted with them in a beer hall. They have the best beer here, Crash! You have to come.

I know you must be worried about Kayleigh. All I can tell you is that she's fine. She's still alive, but she's not here with me in Belgium. I'm sorry I didn't write sooner, but it took me a while to get my shit together. No passport, no money, no pants... it was a bitch to establish my identity and get access to my cash again. Thank god Ernesto helped me set up that Swiss bank account before we got hijacked off the coast of Colares.

Kayleigh and Francesca are believers now. They've seen the aliens up close and personal. There's a lot more I should tell you, but I want to do it in person, face-to-face. Please use the enclosed American Express Card to set up the rats with a three-month supply of food and then use it to buy yourself a round-trip ticket to Brussels. For cash advances at ATMs use the PIN #: 6969. Spend freely. I want to pay for your whole trip.

I'm staying at a hotel called Le Dixseptieme (The Seven Dicks) at 25 Rue de la Madeleine. Any cab driver can tell you where to find it. It's just one block away from where I touched down. They have oil paintings in the lobby that look like they were painted by Rembrandt-only they're of dogs standing around in military uniforms. You'll like it here, Crash. Trust me.

See you soon!

Best Wishes,

Skeeze Lester Huntley, Esq.

I go over the entire letter one more time. Then I give the envelope a shake. Out falls an American Express Gold Card with my name on it:

**Mr. Crash Gordon Swannson
V.P., Buckthorn Productions, LLC**

V.P. as in Vice-President? Does that make me a full-fledged partner in Skeeze's porno ventures?

So it would seem.



With the *Insurrectionist* out of business, I don't have to think about it very hard. I'm going to Belgium.

As I start up the stairs, I see James' Corvette parked just down the road at the Moonstone Inn. He rents a parking space from the hotel for a hundred bucks a month so his Corvette's glossy black fiberglass exterior won't get any dings in it from the gravel turnout. (My sun-blasted yellow Jeep doesn't require any such babying - the new dings will have some stiff competition from the already-existing rust spots.)

The Corvette tells me that James must be back from his most recent trip to Hollywood. Lately, he's been spending a

lot of time at Rina's place just off Sunset Boulevard. That reminds me... I head back down the stairs and get Skeeze's squirt tape off the Jeep's front seat, where I'd forgotten it. I don't want to be the bearer of bad news, but James deserves to know what Francesca had been up to before she left him. Besides, his relationship with Rina is now so solidly established that his ego can probably withstand the blow.

"James? Are you home?" I shout as I unlock the front door. I don't want to catch him sitting on the john with the door open, considering the news I'm about to spring on him.

"Over here," says James from the chair in front of my writing desk, where he's seated like a king on his throne.

That's MY chair... I think to myself. Something about James' seated posture immediately puts me on edge. It's an intuitive thing. I can't really explain it except to say that there's an aura of immense arrogance coming off him - much more so than usual. He's commandeered my chair before and it hasn't bothered me the way it does now. Maybe that's because there's a stack of new manuscript pages on the desk beside the typewriter - from my novel-in-progress, *Nitt-Witt Ridge* - and by the look of the stack, James has been reading through it without my permission.

"Did you rent a video?" he asks me.

"This?" I hold up the squirt tape. "No... this is something I found over at Skeeze's place. I think you should watch it, but you're not going to like what you see."

"What's it about? More UFO junk?"

I toss the videotape to him with an underhanded flick of my wrist. The cover will tell him everything he needs to know.

“‘How To Make Your Lady Squirt...’” James reads aloud.
“God, is that Kayleigh?”

“Francesca has a starring role in it, too.”

“You’re shitting me!”

“I wish. I’m sorry. I was wrong about Skeeze. He definitely had something going on with both Francesca *and* Kayleigh.”

“Was he fucking them behind our backs?!”

“There wasn’t any actual fucking going on that I could see... at least not on the video. But there’s a blowjob scene toward the end that you might find disturbing. Skeeze just stands there like a nude monument to Grover Cleveland, getting sucked from both sides. But when he finally blows his wad, it’s all reflex. No one’s touching him. He calls it glandular mastery. It’s quite impressive, from a clinical point of view.”

“Francesca actually *blew* him? *Motherfuck!*” James slams his fist on the desk, scattering my manuscript pages.

“That’s not the worst of it. To close out the video, Skeeze does this little victory dance to a Talking Heads song – one of those African beat things. And he’s not a bad dancer... think David Byrne in *Stop Making Sense*, only a lot fatter. You’ll see for yourself, but this really got to me... at one point during the dance, Skeeze gives his hips a big shake and his flaccid dick swings up and loops itself around his wrist like a marsupial’s prehensile tail.”

“That’s impossible!”

“That’s what I would’ve thought if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. There’s no precedent for it in the *Care and Structural Maintenance of Your Penis* manual that I got from the Army Corps of Engineers when I turned thirteen. Skeeze goes just way beyond the arithmetic mean for

erectile length of the human wiener – especially in Japan. He’s hung like fucking Godzilla.”

James grimaces. “I hope that means his dick’s all green and scaly.”

“No, just... incredibly large and capable of shooting monstrous, slimy loads. Francesca’s hair caught the worst of it.”

“That’s how I knew she was screwing around on me. *Stiff hair!*”

“I guess I’ll just call you Sherlock Marrsden from here on out. You were right about her cheating on you. Sort-of.”

“Why aren’t you more pissed off about this?” James asks me, seemingly angry with me for not being angry enough. “That fucking walrus-dicked backstabber blew his load all over our women!”

“Well, the way I figure it, the video had to’ve been made before I moved to Cambria. So technically, Kayleigh wasn’t my girlfriend at the time they were making it. But yeah, Skeeze wasn’t exactly treating us with perfect candor, was he? I just got a letter from him, by the way. He’s in Brussels.”

“Is Francesca with him?”

“He said he’s on his own. Kayleigh’s not there either.”

“Then let’s go over there and kill him.”

I go over to the refrigerator to get us a couple of beers instead. “He sent me an American Express Card and told me to buy a plane ticket with it,” I tell James. “So I’m going – and you’re welcome to come along – but I don’t feel like killing him. You probably won’t either, once you cool off.”

“Skeeze is a traitor to me – and you will be, too, if you go hang out with him.”

“Don’t take everything so fucking *personally*. I’m not betraying you if I go track down Skeeze so I can find out what happened to Kayleigh and Francesca. Besides, you’re with Rina now. Isn’t she better?”

James takes a moment to think that over. “Yeah, Rina is way better for me than Francesca ever was. She’s been helping me with my career. Before you blindsided me with this sordid sex tape shit, I was about to tell you that I’d signed a book deal.”

“Seriously?” I hand James a Coors Light. The cans sneeze as we open them.

“No lie. Nick Hellerstein got a bidding war started for *Vampirism Made Easy*. He called me at Rina’s place a few days ago to tell me the highest offer was from Disney. We sold them the film rights for \$666,000. Then St. Martin’s Press chipped in with a low six-figure deal to publish the book in hardcover.”

“Wow! That doesn’t happen very often: three-quarters of a million for a first novel by an unknown author.”

“That’s about the size of it.” James tries, but fails, to suppress a narcissistic smirk.

“Well, congratulations! That’s amazing!” Part of me is genuinely glad for James, while another, less evolved part, is secretly choking on envy. *It could have happened to a nicer guy. Like me, for instance....*

“Also, just so you know... I’ll be moving out this weekend.”

“I guess you can finally afford your own place, huh?”

"I'm moving in with Rina," says James, sounding self-important. "We've been looking at houses together. Between her acting gigs and my book deal, we figure we can afford a place in Malibu or Bel Air."

That's just a little too much for me. I can't help myself... I feel the need to get snarky: "Wow, James, that's really great! I lost my job today - the *Insurrectionist* is out of business - but everything's working out for you just like a fairy tale. Except, of course, for that part about your wife giving Skeeze a blowjob."

"Fuck you, Crash. Your girlfriend blew that troll, too."

True enough. And I don't have a six-figure book deal or a movie star girlfriend to compensate for it.



In the aftermath of that triple assault on my ego - the squirt tape, the end of the *Insurrectionist*, the news of James' enviable book deal - I end up feeling so low that I contemplate going straight to the Cambria Library to proposition Lee Ann the Librarian for a quick consolation screw. But I know that would be sleazy of me, so I don't do it. Instead, I throw myself into preparing for my trip.

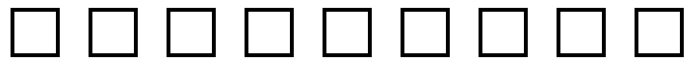
I make a phone call to Domino's to get in touch with Yiffer, the pimply pizza delivery kid who chauffeured us to the movies. He still works there. He tells me he'll be happy to feed the rats at Buckthorn Manor in my stead for \$300 a month. We make a plan to meet there the next day so I can show him how everything works.

In the meantime, I use Skeeze's Amex card to pay three months forward on the goat milk and *tacos con queso*

delivery accounts. I also contact my realtor, Wanda Mundo, to find out how I can pay my rent and utility bills for three months in advance. Then I book a one-way ticket to Amsterdam, which is much cheaper than flying into Brussels on such short notice. Skeeze might be feeling generous, but that's no reason for me to waste his money. I can easily take a train from the Netherlands into Belgium. It doesn't look that far on the map. *Besides, my inner sleazemonger counsels, Amsterdam's red-light district should be worth checking out.*

Abjection always leads me to desperate thoughts of sex. *Why is that? I wonder. Is it an autonomic response programmed into us to increase Loosh yields, or is sex simply the most direct way to regain a zest for living?*

All I know for sure is that whenever I get mopey, I also get horny. Go figure.



Yiffer is in fine fettle when I meet him the next day. It appears he's finally learned how to shave. His flyaway Scandinavian hair is still a straggly mess, but he's bulked up somewhat and he generally looks further along the path toward adulthood. I ask him what he's been up to in the year-and-a-half since *Stalin Says*.

"Not much," Yiffer answers me. "Hanging out. How 'bout you?"

"The same. Kind of getting my ass kicked by life at the moment. That's why I'm going to Brussels. I could use a change."

I pick up the thick plastic bag full of *tacos con queso* that's been left under the portico and I heft it inside through Buckthorn Manor's tall mahogany doors. Yiffer, without being told, grabs the wire-handled crate with its four half-gallon glass jugs full of goat milk.

"Are you going to college next year?" I ask him.

"Nope. No money for that. My grades kind of sucked, anyway." Yiffer steps inside with me and looks around the parlor, taking in the Theremin and the roasted Cub Scout mannequin. "Cool place," he says.

"I might be able to help you get into a work-scholar program at Esalen, if you're interested," I offer. "That's what I did, instead of college."

"I'm still hoping I can make it to Paris and learn how to be a French chef."

I flash on Skeeze's American Express Gold Card in my wallet. Maybe I can give it to Yiffer after I come back from Brussels.

"Is Brussels anywhere near Paris?" he asks me with his pimply face knotted in puzzlement.

"It's close enough. If I visit France during this trip, I'll definitely check things out for you," I promise him.

"See if they need any pizza delivery guys there," Yiffer says, showing me his pragmatic side. "I'll need a job."

"Do you speak French?"

"Not a fuckin' word."

"Okay then..." I say. "Well, here's where the rats get fed." I start setting down the *tacos con queso* and the rats come streaming toward us.

"Awesome!" Yiffer shouts as his tennis shoes are overrun.

I hand him three hundred dollars and the keys to the Rat Castle. At least this job seems like it's going to work out for him.



After all the arrangements have been made, I spend the better part of a day traveling. James drops me off at the local airport and a twin-engine turboprop takes me from San Luis Obispo to L.A., where I have a two-hour layover. Then I board a TWA 737 for a flight to New York with a brief layover in Chicago. (At O'Hare, I glimpse Ronald Reagan striding the corridors in a tan trench coat with a team of black-suited Secret Service agents practically running alongside him. The ex-President is much taller than I'd imagined him - and a fast walker, vigorous despite his incipient senility.) I switch planes one last time at JFK to fly across the Atlantic on a KLM 747, which lands at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol (whatever *Schiphol* means... to my ear it sounds like it might be the Dutch equivalent of *shithole*, although the airport itself seems brighter and more efficient and hygienic than most). After the cattle call at customs and a pause to exchange currency, it's just a twenty-minute train ride to get from Schiphol to Amsterdam's grand Centraal Station.

It's late by the time I finally arrive - well past midnight. I've booked a cheap room aboard a houseboat near the NINT museum, about a half-mile away. After asking a friendly-looking station agent for directions, I shoulder my backpack and start off.

There's no one around when I get to the houseboat. Every door is locked. I can't get in. Maybe it's the wrong

houseboat – it's dark and there are a lot of them – although I'm fairly certain I've found the right berth. I'm too wired to sleep, anyway. It's a warm night, so I decide to just walk around the city until dawn. My backpack is heavy, but I can deal with that. I'm in a state of 'holiday consciousness,' as Colin Wilson called it. Everything looks interesting and I'm very glad to be alive.

I've never been to Amsterdam before, but somehow it feels as if I know my way around. The street names don't mean much to me – *Oosterdokskade*, *Binnen Bantammerstraat*, *Oudezijds Achterburgwal* – but a sort of psychic magnetism leads me over bridges and along canals directly to the red-light district. Within ten minutes I'm standing in front of an erotic theater with a big neon sign depicting an upright pink elephant wearing a green necktie. At least I think it's an elephant. Theatre Casa Rosso, the place is called. A grey-whiskered barker standing on the busy sidewalk calls out to me:

"Sleaze and filth, lad... you know you need it!"

The entrance fee is 75 guilders, which seems rather steep, but it includes two free drinks. I decide to go in. Just before I buy my ticket, I notice two perfect white swans in the black water of the canal across the street, drifting through the neon pink elephant's rippling reflection. There must be a strange analogy worth looking for in that, but I'm not ready to parse it yet.

Inside, it's a proper theater – not anywhere near so skuzzy as I had anticipated. There's a red velvet circular bed on a rotating platform on the low center stage. Two people are on top of it, fucking. The man looks like a swarthy Spaniard, all smooth oiled muscles and greasy black hair. The girl, in a downward dog pose beneath him,

wears a white wig reminiscent of Rina Rowley's semi-famous platinum bob, but fashioned from fishing line or tiny fiber optic cables instead of human hair. It's so fake it's almost laughable, but at the same time it catches the spotlights in a unique way that lends her face a sexy, otherworldly glow.

The Spaniard appears bored. He cuts loose with some lame breakdancing moves while still pumping away in time to the blaring music ("Nothing Compares 2 U" by Sinead O'Connor). His erect member would be designated merely high average in my old penis manual from the Army Corps of Engineers - big for Taiwan, but not so impressive in Zimbabwe. I'd always thought that seeing two live people screwing would be a voyeuristic thrill, but in this situation it's decidedly not.

I take a seat close to the rotating bed with the other porn monkeys and set down my backpack. I must be looking glum, because when the white-wigged girl comes around again she turns her head my way and stares into my eyes with an exaggerated frown. Then she places her index fingers at the corners of her glossy, glittering lips and pushes them up into a doll-like smile. All this while she's being balled by a breakdancing Spaniard. I find myself smiling back.

The rest of the show consists of lewd reptile encounters, feats of vaginal calligraphy, and unpeeled banana swallowing. After the rude revelations of Skeeze's squirt tape, the eroticism on view in the Theatre Casa Rosso seems ponderously comic, like a clumsy circus spectacle. I drink two large glasses of Heineken draft and pick up my backpack to leave after about ninety minutes, when the acts on stage begin to repeat. On my way out, I give a fond wave

to the girl in the white fishing line wig. She blows me a kiss goodbye from under the stoical Spaniard, still banging away at her blasé vagina.

It must be around three in the morning, Amsterdam time, but the sidewalk outside is still crowded with people. A lot of them seem to be coming and going from a narrow alleyway just up the street. I head down the alley myself to see what I can see. What I find there is a long row of Amsterdam's famous red-lit windows with an assortment of scantily clad women posing behind the glass - a terrarium of sexual possibilities. Some seem aloof, others beckon to passing men, while still others coyly smile and flash their tits.

They're as varied as butterflies. This one's petite with dusky, kohl-lined eyes and exotic dark skin. She could be Turkish - or Moroccan, maybe - a concubine in some lucky sultan's harem. A sapphire blue scarf wraps around her ribs in such a way that the luscious plump undersides of her breasts push out from under the silk, tantalizingly exposed. In the next window there's one that looks Russian, an imperious Slavic blonde in a white swansdown bikini and rhinestone studded pumps. Here's another with raven black hair in a Bettie Page cut and alabaster skin laced up tight in a red leather corset that pushes her boobs up to absurd heights. And another that looks like someone's randy grandma. And another... a skinny Thai girl with a dyed-blond pixie cut, perky nipples, and violet-lidded eyes. And another... a cascade of auburn hair, a fashion model's face with wide Carly Simon lips, and an ass that is quite literally stopping traffic.

It's hard to believe that I could have sex with any one of them for around 100 guilders - or sixty dollars, more or

less. Of course, I wouldn't be the only one.

I keep walking, seriously thinking about going back for that quasi-Moroccan girl, goaded by my creeping hard-on. But then I see a flash of long blonde hair up ahead and a face that seems familiar. I walk a few steps closer. It can't be.... *It is!*

Call it synchronicity, psychic magnetism, remote viewing weirdness, or divine guidance. Who can really say how it works? What I do know is this:

By some inscrutable method, I've found Kayleigh.



I tap on the red-tinted window. Kayleigh startles – then screams (for joy, I hope), recognizing me right away. She leaps behind a red velvet curtain and throws open the door to her little prostitute booth.

“Crash! *Omigod!* Shit!” she exclaims, hugging me, kissing my cheek. “How’d you find me? Did Skeeze tell you where I was?”

“I just walked here...” I say, still trying to process the fact that my girlfriend has become a prostitute. “I was on my way to see Skeeze, actually, but he didn’t tell me you were here.”

“You must be psychic! You’re such a tripster!” says Kayleigh, resorting to one of her overused Appalachian catchphrases. She gives me a deep French kiss that I’m not quite ready for. Then she says, “Well, c’mon inside... people are starin’ at us.”

Indeed. I may have just received one of the most effusive hooker greetings that Amsterdam has ever seen.

Inside the booth, with the door closed, there's an almost overpowering stench of semen mixed with sweat and Kayleigh's beloved patchouli. She has quite a few candles going that give a warm, cozy glow to the darkened chamber with its threadbare rugs and minimalist, whoring-related decor. There's a bed against one wall - more like a platform, really - made up with a dingy burgundy bed sheet and a crisp white towel. Twelve-inch square mirror tiles cover three of the four walls. I see my own reflection in them and become self-conscious, but Kayleigh - standing before me in nothing but a lacey black push-up bra, black stiletto heels, and a miniscule black thong - seems perfectly at home.

"How long have you been, uh... doing this?" I ask.

"Hookin'? I got started right after we set down in Brussels. How much did Skeeze tell you already?"

"Not enough, obviously."

"Then let me fill you in." Kayleigh sits down in the center of the white towel on the bed and pats the space next to her. "Here. Sit."

I hesitate.

Kayleigh says, "Don't worry... it's clean. I jus' changed it. We get a fresh stack o' towels every day. Comes with the rent."

"You pay to rent this place?"

"Shit yeah! Me an' three other girls. It's a totally legit business. It's not like we have pimps."

"That's a relief...." A relief from what, I'm not exactly sure. I feel like my brain is lagging way behind this conversation.

There's an uncomfortable pause. Kayleigh picks up a briarwood pipe from a low shelf next to the bed and packs

its bowl with oily-looking leaves from a leather pouch. She lights up.

"Want some?" she asks, talking without breathing, holding on to the smoke. "It's ganja mixed with pipe tobacco." Exhaling flamboyantly - with squinting eyes and a dry, raspy cough - she says: "You can buy it straight from the coffeeshops here."

"I feel like I should try to keep my head clear for just a little while longer," I tell her. "So you said you started... doing this in Brussels. How did *that* happen?"

"Well, I don't know if Skeeze told you, but when the spaceship set us down we were butt-naked."

"He told me that, yeah... but he didn't mention you or Francesca being with him."

"Well, we were," she says, puffing on the pipe now like a contemplative Oxford don. "It was pretty damn awkward. But some nice people gave us their coats. Then this one guy came up to me, thinkin' I was a whore an' all. He said he'd pay me two thousand francs jus' to blow him in his Peugeot. We didn't have no clothes, no passports - no nothin' - an' that sounded like a lotta money to me. So I went ahead an' did it. Francesca tried to talk me out of it, but the way I seen it, I done smoked dick for love, so why not do it to survive? Later, I found out that two thousand francs was only around fifty bucks, so I felt kinda ripped off. But live an' learn, right?"

"So you kept at it..." I observe.

"We needed the fuckin' money! It took Skeeze forever to get the American Embassy to believe he was who he said he was. The banks wouldn't give him his money 'til he got a

new passport. So I did what I had to. My pussy bought us clothes, put a roof over our heads, an' it fed all three of us."

"I hope you used condoms."

"Every damn time," Kayleigh says with a glint of anger in her eyes.

God, I must sound like a prig! Why did I even say that?

"Asshole..." she hisses at me around the pipe stem still clenched in her teeth.

I lean over and give her a hug. "I'm sorry," I say, meaning it. "This is just a lot for me to take in. I guess what I don't understand is, now that Skeeze can get money from the bank again, why are you still doing this?"

"'Cuz I like it," Kayleigh states matter-of-factly, puffing out a huge cloud of sickly-sweet-smelling smoke. "Every fuck is a new adventure. Mostly it's jus' business, but there's times when I feel like I'm doin' a real service to humanity. Like, I get fathers bringin' their sons to me to de-virginize 'em. Them little guys'll be shiverin' like a wet speckled pup, they're so excited. 'Course, they usually cum in like two seconds flat, but they're so *grateful*... I try to make 'em cum again - a couple more times, at least - jus' so they can get the hang of it. And then there's the fat guys and ugly dudes. Out in the real world, those guys don't stand a chance of hookin' up with someone like me. But here, if they got a couple hundred guilders, they can make a memory with me that'll last a lifetime. It's good karma, the way I see it. Plus, I like the variety. It keeps me horny."

I'm beginning to understand that Kayleigh is a true socialist in her sex practices. While unspoken jealousy is raging inside me, I can also see the admirable side to her indiscriminate whoring.

“How many guys have you been with today?” I ask her.

“I don’t know... seven or eight? I got a late start.”

Before I can hide it, my eyes well up with tears.

“Oh, Crash!” she says, throwing her arms around me. “I missed you so much! But I didn’t think there’d be a chance in hell you’d take me back after you found out how I been livin’.”

She kisses me passionately and this time I respond. My whole body shudders with the recognition that I haven’t had any intimate physical contact in eighteen months.

It doesn’t take Kayleigh long to make me Number Nine.



Kayleigh closes up the prostitution booth early that night and takes me home to her apartment. She lives in a narrow brick rooming house with creaking wooden floors, frowsy throw rugs, and an old lady’s array of knickknacks displayed on spindly antique tables. One detail stands out: a dozen green swing-top bottles of Grolsch are lined up on a built-in shelf next to the stairs in the parlor. It’s a perk for the boarders – a pay-as-you-drink honor system. Before we go up, Kayleigh hands me four of the bottles and leaves a wad of guilders on the top shelf as payment.

Her room is small but surprisingly nice. There’s a canopied bed with dark walnut posts and a pretty gold brocade bedspread topped off with a tasseled satin bolster pillow of the same color. The walls are pale butter yellow above waist-high oak wainscoting that has aged to a dark coffee brown. Four tall skinny windows, which open like shutters, provide a view of a twinkling canal where two

small white houseboats are tied up along the bank. The houseboats are close enough that I can make out the potted tulips on their decks.

Kayleigh has a little altar set up in a corner decorated with candles, clementines, incense burners, owl feathers, and a smiling brass Buddha. Other than that, none of her standard witch accoutrements are to be seen. Almost predictably, *Delta of Venus* by Anaïs Nin is on the bedside table, but right underneath it is Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* and *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. I've been meaning to get around to the Dostoyevsky book myself. The other two I've read.

While Kayleigh strips out of her street clothes, I sit down to watch her from the edge of the bed. I can't help but admire how uncommonly beautiful she looks naked.

"I could do with a long, hot bath," she says, slipping into a candy-striped kimono. "Wanna join me?"

My crotch is already tingling with anticipation. She doesn't have to ask twice.

The bathroom is communal, across the hall from her room. No one else is using it this late at night, so Kayleigh bolts the door and starts filling the bathtub. It's a wonderful old clawfoot slipper tub about eight feet long that will easily accommodate both of us sitting down. When the water gets high enough, Kayleigh shakes in some bath salts and turns the faucet down to a steaming hot trickle, to keep the bathwater warm. Then we set down our bottles of Grolsch next to the tub and ease ourselves in for a long talk.

Kayleigh loves Amsterdam. She wants to stay there and eventually open up her own coffeeshop that will sell marijuana and hashish and psychoactive baked goods ("All

we knead is love,” she intends to have printed on the bakers’ T-shirts). Skeeze has promised he’ll go in on it with her and teach her everything he knows about pot cultivation and hydroponics. Soft drugs and prostitution aren’t exactly legal in Amsterdam, but the city’s collective attitude is that if what you do is discreet and you don’t hurt anyone and it brings in some money, then it’s considered okay. She’s found a model for the kind of coffeeshop she’s saving up for, a place called De Tweede Kamer (“Your Second Home”). She promises to show it to me tomorrow.

I ask her what happened in Colares when they disappeared. She tells me they were just hanging out on Skeeze’s yacht when a gigantic black triangle UFO rose up out of the water in front of them. The wind and the waves created by the surfacing UFO were so extreme that they swamped the boat and swept Francesca overboard. Luckily, the black triangle beamed all three of them up before Francesca had a chance to drown. Once they were safely inside the spaceship, they were dunked in a scary, staticky pool of anti-gravity gel (pretty much as Skeeze had described it to me during his interview). Then they were spirited away toward the far side of the Moon.

Once they were on the Moon, Kayleigh met up with the alien space toddlers (“Cute little buggers!”). She’s pretty sure she had her ovaries tweaked and her eggs harvested. Francesca thought her ova had been snagged, too. It didn’t hurt, but the procedure had been quite frightening, with bug-eyed grey aliens wielding freaky-looking surgical tools while impassively ignoring the girls’ obscenity-laced protests.

They didn’t see the nine-foot-tall lizardmen that Skeeze had warned them about, but they got to meet the dog

pilots. That was fun. On the way back to Earth, the dog pilots asked them where they wanted to be dropped off: Colares or Cambria? It was Kayleigh who'd suggested Amsterdam instead. The yacht was probably sunk, all three of them agreed, and all their stuff would be gone no matter what - ripped-off by river pirates if not submerged under a hundred feet of water. As for Cambria, Skeeze wasn't sure they would be safe there. He'd kind of shortchanged the Sinaloa Cartel on their drug deal. It had been an honest accounting error and he was looking to make amends, but that would take a while.

The dog pilots said sure, Amsterdam could be arranged, but there would be some missing time involved. No one cared about the missing time ("What's a few hours, right?" said Skeeze), but the dog pilots had more space-time difficulties than they'd anticipated, and the physics of the situation required them to beam down Skeeze, Francesca, and Kayleigh in Brussels, instead of Amsterdam. And it had to be done sixteen months into the future, without them wearing clothes.

Skeeze was convinced that the dog pilots just had a twisted sense of humor and they wanted to see what would happen to nude humans in a big public square like Grand-Place. The missing time thing was trippy, though. It had seemed like they'd been on the Moon for only a few hours, but sixteen months had passed since they'd been abducted. Skeeze had a theory that the black triangles travel as a future-engineered twist on electromagnetic radiation, like a hyperdimensional television signal that can rearrange itself as a three-dimensional physical object any time it damn well pleases. While it's in hyperdimensional electromagnetic mode (or whatever) it can travel at light-speed - light waves

being just the higher-spectrum cousins of TV signals and radio waves. But time also becomes hyperdimensional in that mode, Skeeze theorized, so the aliens can pop in and out of the past and future in any way they see fit, so long as they're careful not to mess around with world history. Paratime travel, he called it.

But that's just Skeeze's complicated explanation - and Kayleigh admits that she might not be explaining it right. Her take on things is much simpler. She believes that all the billions of galaxies in the known universe are a matrix of *maya* - an illusion. So anything goes.

I've been soaping Kayleigh's breasts while she explains all this to me. During that time, I've developed a periscope-like hard-on. Kayleigh spies it rising underwater from the U-boat of my crotch. With a cute little giggle, she scooches over and straddles me. *God, how I've missed the feeling of skin on skin!* She starts rocking and the bathwater starts sloshing, but we're careful not to splash too much on the tiles.

I'm on the verge of a truly monumental orgasm when we hear a panicked knocking on the bathroom door and a young man's voice calling out from the other side:

"It's raining in the kitchen!"

That sounds rather poetic, I think as my eyes roll back in my head and my pelvic region fires its torpedoes.

"What'd you say?" Kayleigh yells at the door, annoyed. She's missed her chance to retaliate with her own coital depth charge.

"You must get out! It's raining in the kitchen!"

"Okay, Hans... keep your pants on."

Thoroughly pissed, Kayleigh gets out of the tub dripping water (and a little something else). She towels herself off and wraps her candy-striped kimono around her shoulders. When she opens the door she confronts a young blonde man – the Dutch equivalent of Yiffer – who says: “It’s raining in the kitchen. Please drain the tub.”

I slouch down in the murky bathwater and pull the silver chain on the drain plug with my toes.

“We’ll be right out,” Kayleigh promises Dutch Yiffer. She shuts the door so I can stand up and dry off.

Water is literally pouring out of the ceiling in the kitchen, as we discover after we put on our clothes and go downstairs. A burst pipe or a leaky overflow drain from the bathtub must have flooded the subflooring above. Dutch Yiffer is making himself very useful with a mop and a bucket, but there’s no way he can keep up. An old woman with pinkish-blond dyed hair is squawking at him like an enraged flamingo, but she’s not doing much to help. Kayleigh and I start setting out pots and pans under the major drips and dumping them into the sink as they fill up.

Gradually, the kitchen deluge dissipates. By that time, it’s early morning and a milky pink light is seeping into the sky. We haven’t slept at all, but I don’t feel tired.

“Let’s go out for breakfast,” Kayleigh suggests after the counters have been wiped down and the floor tiles start to dry. “My favorite coffeeshop is right around the corner.”



There was a dream-like quality to that day that I’ll never forget. It probably had a lot to do with the little

buttercream-frosted cakes that we ate at De Tweede Kamer – Kayleigh’s favorite coffeeshop – before we set out with Joe Cocker’s version of “Feelin’ Alright” ringing in our ears from the coffeeshop’s high-tech sound system. But that dreamy feeling also had something to do with the genuine love that Kayleigh and I had for each other. Our love had a special intensity that day because, deep down, we both knew it depended on dissociating from our true circumstances, from the choices we’d already made. Like the mayfly – born with only a vestigial mouth and air in its digestive tract – it wasn’t meant to last.

(Though consider this: The mayfly is also born with two penises and its sole purpose, during its brief sojourn on Earth, is to copulate in midair. One must imagine the mayfly happy.)

We were standing in line, waiting for the Van Gogh Museum to open, when the drugs began to kick in. I’m not sure what was in those De Tweede Kamer cakes, but they came on strong. My vision sharpened. Colors became brighter, more intense. My skin lost all sensation, but I was compensated for that by a warm interior glow. I looked over at Kayleigh, who was obviously feeling the same effects. She giggled and held my numb buzzing hand. She was wearing a midnight blue felt hat with a wide, floppy brim in combination with an oversized herringbone tweed jacket, mango yellow golfing pants, and her ever-present briarwood pipe. The impression she made was of a sexy female Gauguin, just returned from Tahiti to Paris – and maybe looking to start some shit in Arles again with van Gogh.

Did I mention that she looked sexy? Kayleigh could dress like a man and somehow that only heightened her

lubricious femininity.

The Van Gogh Museum was a wonder. So many of the famous paintings were there: *The Potato Eaters*, with its grotesque peasant faces and dead-of-winter gloom; the morbid *Skull of a Skeleton with Burning Cigarette*; the much happier paintings from van Gogh's time in Arles, *Fishing Boats on the Beach at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer*, *Bedroom in Arles*, and *Gauguin's Chair* (but we already knew how that episode turned out: "Here's my ear, bitch! Take it!"). We also marveled at the gorgeous, thickly-impastoed flower paintings simply titled *Sunflowers*, *Irises*, and *Almond Blossoms*; the self-portraits that grew increasingly vibrant over the years, to the point of seeming psychedelized (especially the fuzzy-faced *Self-Portrait with Felt Hat*, which to our drug-enhanced eyes wouldn't stop moving); and finally, the paintings done in the last weeks of van Gogh's life, the graphically amazing *Tree Roots* and the eerily foreboding (considering the circumstances...) *Wheatfield with Crows*.

And how was Vincent treated for wringing all that rare beauty from our world? (We were calling him Vincent by the end of our visit – we thought of him as a friend.) The answer is that he was treated worse than a stray dog. His paintings hardly ever sold. He was looked down upon as a lunatic – even by (perhaps especially by) the prostitutes he patronized. In short, he never had the experience of a loving, nurturing relationship with anyone in his adult life – unless you count his brother, Theo. (Gauguin had such a monstrous ego that he was incapable of nurturing anything beyond his own talent.)

So Vincent got depressed and shot himself in a wheatfield at the age of thirty-seven, even though he was turning out

masterpieces on an almost daily basis. Or maybe he didn't shoot himself. The gun was never found (as James would point out to me later), so maybe he was murdered.

Suicide or murder... it didn't matter. Whichever way you looked at it, it was another win for the Archons. No wonder the story of van Gogh's life has become so well known. It illustrates the difficulty of trying to live with passion and integrity in this world, to contribute something meaningful toward the betterment of humanity. The lesson is this:

You'll be broke and lonely for as long as you keep that up. Then, after you're dead, the usual human parasites will cash in on what you did.

But at least Amsterdam now has a museum that commemorates the work of a beautiful soul.

Kayleigh and I were starving by the time we got out of the Van Gogh Museum, so we looked around and found some food vendors. She got something called a *stroopwafel* - a sort of waffle sandwich filled with creamy caramel syrup - while I got a paper cone full of french fries with a big glob of herb-infused mayonnaise to dip them in. I'd never had fries dipped in mayonnaise before. I thought it was genius. There was no way I was ever going back to ketchup.

Our next stop was the Rijksmuseum. We wanted to check out the Rembrandts to see if they had as much bizarro psychedelic life to them as the van Goghs. Before we went inside, we stood by the dimly lit road that runs under the museum and listened to a guy playing a muted brass trumpet in the shadow of the arches. I thought he was doing a Chet Baker number, but Kayleigh told me it was Miles Davis for sure. Whatever it was, it was beautiful and melancholy as fuck. Kayleigh and I held each other and kissed like one of us was about to die in some heroically

tragic fashion. It was the best kiss of my life up to that point.

The Rembrandts were disappointingly unsquirmy, but the powerful chiaroscuro effects were impressive. Rembrandt's canvases looked like they had their own internal light sources – brilliant pools of illumination rising out of turbid, swirling darkness. Not bad for a guy who'd been in the ground for over 300 years.

After the Rijksmuseum, we took a long, meandering stroll back toward the city's center. We passed over hump-backed bridges and watched the glass-topped tourist boats churning through the canals. A woman bicycled past us singing an aria. We stopped in a bar and Kayleigh ordered two shots of *jenever* for us. The shots arrived in tulip-shaped glasses filled to the brim. We knocked them back. It was like drinking icy-cold, syrupy gin. We were both still high from the De Tweede Kamer cakes, but coming down a bit. I was beginning to get some feeling back in my skin. Kayleigh lit up her pipe again to stave off the inevitable crash for as long as possible.

Our next stop was Oude Kerk – an old church in the middle of the red-light district. Kayleigh told me that the sailors used to go there on Sunday morning to beg forgiveness for the sins they'd committed with the whores on Saturday night. I was reminded that the Gnostics believed Jesus had something funky going on with Mary Magdalene.

I thought, *Well, good for him!*

Kayleigh told me she needed to swing by her prostitute booth to arrange for one of the other girls to take her shift that night, so she could have dinner with me. Her friend Brigitte was supposed to be working that afternoon.

Brigitte could call the others to let them know the booth would be free.

We walked arm-in-arm down the red-lit alley, like a feckless married couple on their honeymoon. When we got to the booth, we found it empty. Apparently, Brigitte was taking the day off from deep-throating dicks (her specialty, Kayleigh informed me).

As we were leaving, a freakishly tall Scandinavian man wearing a dorky brown leather fedora and a matching leather jacket and boots approached Kayleigh and asked her in English how much she charged for her services.

"She's not for sale," I told the Big Swede preemptively. His pants were too short and he was wearing one of those embarrassing Eurotrash fanny packs.

"Hold on a sec, Crash," said Kayleigh, sizing up her prospective client. "That's *my* decision, ain't it?"

"How much?" the Big Swede asked again.

"I got the time if you got 500 guilders."

The Big Swede smiled and reached for his fanny pack.

I flushed with anger, feeling disrespected. Kayleigh appeared not to notice. She blithely smiled at me and said, "Don't worry... these big guys always go down fast. I won't be more'n fifteen minutes. Then we'll have 500 guilders to spend on dinner."

"But Kayleigh! You don't have to buy me dinner."

"Oh hush! It'll be my treat."

The two of them disappeared inside the booth while I just stood there like a tongue-tied moron. I started looking around the alley, wanting to kick something. The flabby-breasted girl in the red-lit booth next door seemed to be

laughing at me. In my anger, I thought about going over there and paying her to blow me, if for no other reason than to get her to stop smiling – or maybe to get even with Kayleigh.

Not that Kayleigh would care. Or maybe she would care too much. After all, what she was doing was just a simple business transaction, one she made every day, whereas I would be fornicating not to earn money, but to salve my wounded pride and extract vengeance.

It wasn't easy, but I chose the Buddhist path of non-attachment instead of the blowjob. I slunk off to go buy a beer.

When I returned forty-five minutes later, Kayleigh was just leaving the prostitute booth on shaky legs. The Big Swede exited behind her, smirking at me before heading off down the alley. Once he was out of hearing range, Kayleigh said to me:

“Jesus, that guy really knew what he was doin’. I came so hard I bit my damn pipe in half!”

I don't know how those Buddhists do it.

I told Kayleigh I was leaving that night to go see Skeeze. No witchy balls of lightning exploded in my face on the way up the stairs to collect my backpack from her apartment, although she seemed angry enough for it. Near tears, she accused me of “actin’ all proud an’ shit.”

There may have been some truth to that accusation. I refused to stay for dinner because I couldn't find the humility to say:

“Please just love me and stop doing stuff that breaks my heart.”

THE “O” IN THE OÄÄD INSTITUTE

I get a visual jolt when Skeeze opens his hotel room door to greet me at Le Dixseptieme. His hair has turned snowy white, as if all the pigment had been frightened out of it by some horrible event. He’s wearing it in bristly buzz cut now – like some steely-nerved Apollo astronaut – and his scraggly red beard has been trimmed, leaving only a well-combed walrus mustache above his upper lip and a thin white goatee corralling his chin. He looks years older, but also more worldly and dignified.

Or at least he would have looked dignified if he hadn’t been wearing a gigantic white diaper.

“Hey, buddy!” Skeeze cries, giving me a hug. “It’s great to see you again!”

“It’s good to see you, too, Skeeze,” I say, stepping inside. “What’s up with the diaper?”

Skeeze’s hotel room looks like a lavish urban apartment. It has beautiful old raw log beams supporting the ceiling, a fireplace with a carved wooden mantle, and elegant but comfortable-looking furnishings – with an emphasis on kilim throw pillows. Coyote, Skeeze’s Old English Sheepdog, lounges on a cluster of those pillows over by the fire. Apparently he was able to skip the six-month quarantine at customs by virtue of being dropped off by a UFO.

Moody Middle Eastern music is coming from a Bose stereo system set up against the far wall. It’s all slow,

clinking finger cymbals accompanied by the snake-charming sounds of Moroccan oboes, thumping rawhide drums, and the yips and ululations of overzealous belly dancers. After Skeeze shuts the door and locks it from inside, he duck-waddles over to turn the music down. The bunching of white cloth between his legs is making it hard for him to get around.

"This isn't a diaper," he tells me, posing in front of the stereo like a belly-bloated runway model. "It's a *sannyasi's* traditional loincloth."

"Is that anything like a Mormon's sacred underpants?"

"It is, only better! It's like what Gandhi wore."

"Looks uncomfortable," I say. "Does this mean you've renounced using toilets?"

"No!" Skeeze laughs and then turns serious. "Crash, what the hell happened to you? I can tell you're upset."

I *am* upset. There's no use lying about it. We sit down and I pour out the whole story to him: my falling-apart life in Cambria, my discovery of the squirt tape, James' book deal, my reunion with Kayleigh in Amsterdam, the Big Swede.... By the time I'm done, Skeeze is stroking the tips of his white walrus mustache, deep in thought.

"You were right to try the path of non-attachment," he says, "but the drama of life always has a way of sucking us right back down into the muck of human existence. *Moksha* is elusive."

He's right, but I'm not ready to admit that to a grown man wearing a diaper. "*Moksha*! Is that what this Baby Huey trip of yours is all about? Liberation from *Samsara* - from the endless wheel of karma and reincarnation and all that shit?"

“Your words are telling.... Who do you think conned you into incarnating in shit – into a dying hunk of smelly *meat* that wants to eat and fuck and void its bowels without end?”

“I’m sure you’re on the verge of telling me I tricked myself, you half-naked fakir,” I say, wishing Skeeze would put on some clothes. His flabby, mole-speckled skin is kind of grossing me out.

“Think about how the flesh repulses you now,” says Skeeze, as if he knows exactly what I’m thinking. “Think about Kayleigh biting her pipe in half as that Big Swede brought her to climax after climax with his Big Swedish Meatballing....”

“Okay, Skeeze! I get your point.”

“You might think you’re ready to renounce the pleasures of the flesh right now, to become celibate, but that would be a huge mistake. Only the man who has mastered the art of human sexuality can effectively renounce it. You have to master the things that make you feel insecure, not just run away from them.”

“Wait a second... what? I kind of blanked out there after the Swedish Meatballing part.”

“What I was saying was that most people don’t want to be free from fear. They just want to play games with it and talk about freeing themselves from fear. Are you one of them?”

“I sure as hell hope not.”

“Then I have a solution for you. I want you to come with me to the OääD Institute tomorrow.”

“What’s the OääD Institute?”

“You’ll find out in the morning. In the meantime, let’s go out to a beer hall and get shitfaced. I’ll tell you more about

the aliens... because you know you're curious."

"Sounds good," I say. "But where will I sleep?"

"We'll get you a room here in the hotel on our way out. C'mon... this'll be fun. You need to learn how to enjoy life more, before you start renouncing it."

"If you don't go looking for roses, you won't get pricked by their thorns," I counter, recalling a T-shirt slogan that I wrote about for my high school newspaper.

"Get real, Crash..." Skeeze verbally swats me. "A few pricks won't kill you. Kayleigh should've taught you that by now, at least."



Skeeze takes me to a nearby beer hall called À la Mort Subite ("At the Sudden Death"). A cheer goes up as we enter through the tall wooden doors. Skeeze is a local celebrity: The Man From the Black Triangle. Everyone wants to buy him a beer. There's no doubt that his burgeoning fame can be partially attributed to wearing a loincloth in public - kind of like that legendary singing cowboy in Manhattan who plays his guitar on street corners while wearing nothing but boots, a tall Stetson, and tight white underpants.

This particular beer hall dates back to 1928, Skeeze has informed me. The décor doesn't appear to have changed much since then. Several square columns with fancy gilt scrollwork support the high ceilings, while tall arched mirrors with more golden scrollwork hang from the warm yellow walls, reflecting long rows of old wooden tables packed, shoulder-to-shoulder, with beer drinkers. The

variety of beer glasses on display is truly impressive. Every brand of beer in Belgium seems to be paired with its own special glass: *Chimay Bleue, Westmalle Dubbel, Grimbergen Tripel, Maes Pils, Rochefort, Duvel, Orval, Mort Subite Blanche....* It's beer heaven.

My kind of place.

It doesn't look like Skeeze and I are going to get much serious talking done. As soon as we sit down, we're immediately swarmed by well-wishers who thump Skeeze on his naked back while making references to his alien exploits:

"Skeeze! Where did all the black triangles go? I haven't seen any lately."

"Can my girlfriend get her picture taken with you?"

"I saw that article they wrote about you in the newspaper. What's the weather like on Jupiter, Skeeze?"

"Have you seen Uranus? *Hoo-hah!*"

"They like to joke, but the Moon needs women. Right, my friend?"

"And what the moonwomen need is our friend's big Mars Bar, I think."

"The aliens can have my sperm. They're welcome to it. It makes no difference to me."

"Are the aliens jealous because our women aren't bald and they have nice big titties?"

"We must have beer for our space-traveling companions here, Dietger! Two Pauwel Kwaks in coachman's glasses! I will pay!"

I sit and watch as Skeeze responds to his fans with the cool aplomb of a diapered foreign diplomat. Eventually, two

huge beers are set in front of us on their own special wooden stands. The beer glasses are very tall and flared at the top, in the shape of upside down oboes, with clear rounded bulbs at the bottom. They're like something you might find in a medieval alchemist's laboratory. They appear to hold about a liter each.

"Cheers!" I say to Skeeze, clinking beer bulbs with him.

"Bottoms up, motherfucker!"

I watch in amazement as Skeeze tilts the beer glass above his face and chugs the whole thing. When he's done, he belches thunderously to more cheers and a round of applause.

"Now it's your turn," he says to me, using the palm of his hand to wipe the foam from his silky white mustache.

It's good beer - and I'm thirsty - so I don't have much trouble following his lead. I garner some polite applause as well.

"Another round, Dietger!" our polo-shirted benefactor calls out to the waiter.

"Hey... so where's Francesca?" it finally occurs to me to ask.

"Francesca!" Skeeze grins. "As soon as she got her new passport, she was outta here. She went off on an all-expenses-paid tour of Europe, compliments of Buckthorn Productions. That squirt tape of ours turned out to be a real goldmine."

"Really?"

"Crash, it's amazing! Ernesto helped me cut a distribution deal with the Swedish Erotica guys before we left Cambria, so I checked in with them once we got here. They say it's

turned into a total phenomenon. So many women are going into porno stores to buy it that they're crowding out the men."

"So you're getting women to buy porn?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing! I'm actually proud of you, Skeeze. I mean, here I am in Europe, thanks to the Buckthorn Productions American Express Card, so it would be hypocritical of me to say there's anything wrong with teaching women how to squirt."

Two more big beers are set down in front of us. "To our space brothers and their squirting pussy technology!" our benefactor cries, raising his glass. We tip our beers in his direction and thank him.

"Okay, look..." says Skeeze, meeting my eyes with a level gaze, "I'm sorry I turned your girlfriend into a nymphomaniac, but that'd been set in motion way before you even got to Cambria. And it doesn't happen to everyone. I mean, look at Francesca. She squirts... but she's not out there prostituting herself, or hooking up with well-hung Swedish guys every chance she gets."

"So you say. But James might see things differently. He thinks you ruined his marriage."

"Oh, please... Francesca would've left him no matter what. Who wants to stay married to an angry drunk?"

"Rina Rowley seems to think he's okay."

"Maybe he's not so angry now that he's a millionaire."

"Maybe not. He's still kind of a self-absorbed prick, though, to tell you the truth. But at least he gave me a ride to the airport."

“That must’ve cost him. Here’s to James. Bottoms up!”

“Again?”



My hangover the next morning is of a magnitude I’ve never experienced before. When I wake up, it takes me a few minutes to recall where I am. *Hotel room... Brussels... a night out drinking with Skeeze... big alchemist beakers full of beer, followed by weird slices of meat called kip-kap and shots of aquavit poured from the flask of a friendly Dane....* I’m still in my clothes. My tongue feels like it’s coated with the powdery white hairs that grow on desiccated dog turds. I lurch to the bathroom and pour myself a glass of water from the sink. My hands shake so badly that I wonder if I’ve somehow developed late-stage Parkinson’s disease. *Kip-kap... made from gelatinized pigs’ cheeks, according to Skeeze....* The water rebounds from my stomach. *Oh fuck!* I drop to my knees and vomit into the toilet – repeatedly – until my stomach is empty. *That feels better. Oh, wait... no it doesn’t. Here comes the dry heaves....*

I crawl back to bed. Literally crawl. I’m too weak to stand. I try to remember what happened after the aquavit. I can’t. *Total blackout.* I don’t even know how I got back to the hotel.

That’s how Skeeze finds me an hour later: still in bed, whimpering. A maid lets him in to my room. He slaps me on the shoulder and says with hearty good cheer: “C’mon, Crash, up and at ‘em! We’ve got business to take care of at the OääD Institute, remember?”

Oh fuck! I spider-crawl to the bathroom and throw up again.

Skeeze is laughing at me. "This is actually the perfect state for you to be in," he says, after I've finished retching. "Your defenses are down, so the Hu sisters will have an easier time getting through your body armor. C'mon! Let's go!"

Who the hell are the Hu sisters? I wonder. Did I meet them last night?

"Do I have any say in this?" I ask, hearing my own voice echo from within the sour-smelling toilet bowl.

Skeeze tells me there's no use arguing - I'm going.



Fortunately, the OääD Institute isn't far. It's just a few doors down the street from our rooms at Le Dixseptieme, on the third floor above a street-level art gallery in some old building without an elevator. I'm sweating by the time I make it up the stairs. I can smell the alcohol coming out of my pores. Skeeze starts laughing at me again as he gets out his keys.

"Dude, you reek!" he says. "I tried to warn you about Jeppe's aquavit, but you wouldn't listen."

"I don't get why you're not hungover, too. I must've seen you guzzle at least five or six of those big Belgian beers."

"I've got the constitution of a musk ox," Skeeze brags. "It's because of all the work I do here."

The door in front of us has a small brass plaque with the Institute's logo engraved on it in fancy, vaguely phallic script. I never would have known it was there from the street. Skeeze gets the door open and we enter a big, empty loft with hardwood plank floors and floor-to-ceiling

mirrors on the far wall, like a practice space for Belgian ballerinas. Toward the back, there's a modern-looking kitchen off to one side and beyond it, three more doors leading to I don't know where.

Skeeze escorts me to the door on the far left and opens it, revealing a windowless, cork-lined room with a padded massage table. Two slender, serene-looking Asian women stand beside the table wearing identical jade green pencil skirts and black short-sleeved jersey tops with rhinestones spelling out the brand name *bebe* across their chests. They're both pleasingly busty.

"Crash, I'd like you to meet Hu Zhi and Hu Mee. Mee... Zhi... this is Crash. You'll be causing him excruciating pain today."

"Oh great..." I say.

The two Asian women bow their beautiful heads toward me, smiling without speaking. They appear to be identical twins, somewhere in their early-thirties (or maybe late-forties – with Asian women, it's hard for me to tell...). Their thick, abundant black hair is piled high in loose, matching buns held in place by lacquered chopsticks. In my hungover state, only the chopsticks look different, nothing else. Mee's chopsticks are red and Zhi's are black. Or maybe it's the other way around.

"Zhi and Mee are master practitioners from the White Lotus School of qigong massage," Skeeze informs me. "They grew up in a tiny farming village in northern China where these qigong techniques have been practiced for over three thousand years. No one's ever gotten sick there in that whole time."

“Impressive,” I say, while thinking to myself that a claim like that sounds more like a Chinese folk tale than a verifiable statistic.

“I was damn lucky to find them when I did,” Skeeze continues. “It was pure synchronicity. I’d sprained my back getting up too fast after the aliens dropped us off in Brussels, so I started looking around for a chiropractor. I found Mee and Zhi instead. They were my inspiration for starting the Oääd Institute.”

Zhi and Mee smile at Skeeze as if they understand his every word, but they still aren’t saying anything.

“So what *is* the Oääd Institute, anyway? What do you do here?”

“At the Oääd Institute, we take a multidisciplinary approach to increasing life energy, or *qi*, in the human body,” Skeeze tells me. “Qigong massage is the first step, but then we combine it with Tantric breathing exercises – to awaken your *kundalini* power – and Reichian *orgone* therapy – to dissolve body armor and increase orgasmic potency.”

“Sounds wild.”

“Have you ever read *Die Funktion des Orgasmus* by Wilhelm Reich? It’s a profound document, my friend. Reich presented it to Sigmund Freud on his 70th birthday.”

“You don’t have to get all pedantic with me, Skeeze,” I tell him. “I may not have read Reich in the original German, like you, but I’ve read him in translation. And I’ve been familiar with his concepts since I was about twelve years old – when I became really curious about the, uhm, *function of the orgasm*. I’ve always been a big reader.”

“Then you’ll know that Reich believed we store emotional blockages and traumatic memories in our muscle tissue, which results in chronic muscular tension – or body armor – that, according to Reich, is the root cause of most human illness and neurotic behavior. Here at the OääD Institute, we dissolve that muscular tension with our massage techniques, causing abreactions of the repressed memories that were responsible for creating that tension in the first place. We heal the mind by putting hands on the body.”

“Did the aliens put you up to this?” I ask Skeeze, half in jest.

“Dude, we’re helping people here!” he says. “As their muscular armor melts away, our clients start feeling waves of pleasure moving through their bodies. They become less neurotic. More confident and loving. Healthier in every way. Even their sex lives improve as their orgasmic potency is released.”

“And if they’re women, I’ll bet they learn how to squirt.”

“Exactly! Dude, we’ve only been in business a few months, but we already have over fifty clients! All women. You’ll be the first male to go through the program – aside from myself – if you’re up for it.”

I take another look at Hu Zhi and Hu Mee, who both coyly smile with their rhinestone-studded bust lines calling out to me:

“Hey *bebe bebe....*”

“Okay,” I say. “I’m in.”



After Skeeze leaves the massage room, Mee and Zhi lead me over to a hidden panel in the cork-lined wall that opens onto a black marble tiled bathroom. There's a vinyl-covered table against the far wall and above it, a nickel-plated shower assembly with a long, flexible coil of hose connected to a handheld showerhead. After a few gruff words of what I assume to be Mandarin, Mee and Zhi start to undress me while making the universally recognized sign - hands waving in front of their noses - to indicate that I stink.

I've never been naked in front of two attractive middle-aged Asian women before. I find the experience somewhat embarrassing (I'm covered with scars, after all...). But it's also semi-arousing - so much so that when they jointly pull down my boxer shorts they find me sporting a bloated half-boner. Which is a good thing, because I didn't want to appear too small in front of them. My semi-tumescence makes everything look bigger. Only now I seem to be losing control of it and heading toward a full-blown erection.

Uh-oh....

Mee or Zhi - one of them - takes my hand and leads me over to the vinyl-covered table, indicating that I should lie facedown on it. She turns on the handheld showerhead and checks the water temperature while I clamber up on the table and assume a prone position with Mister Stiffy straining beneath my stomach like an avid dachshund exploring a gopher hole.

The showerhead gets tilted my way and starts hosing me down. The water is warm. Its splashing needle-pricks soothe my hangover-sensitized flesh. The other twin joins her sister beside the table and squeezes a big dollop of eucalyptus-scented hand soap into her palm from a gallon container with a pale ivory pump spout that I hadn't noticed

until just that moment. The showerhead gets turned off. Zhi and Mee start lathering up every inch of my skin with their four hands, working their fingers into every crevice, caressing me, teasing me. I'm finding the sensation exquisitely pleasurable. I wish it would go on for hours.

But no, the showerhead is soon turned back on and I'm hosed off as dispassionately as if I were a Mitsubishi at a car wash. The twins then grab hold of the far side of my body and roll me over. My erection pops up like a lecherous Jack-in-the-Box. Zhi and Mee don't seem to notice.

The whole process starts over: shower, soap, indescribably sensual caressing. I get a good look at their faces this time. One of them - Zhi, I've decided - has a cute little beauty mark above the corner of her lip that the other one lacks. I catch Zhi's eye and she looks back at me with genuine kindness - or perhaps I should call it a deep and wise compassion. I see the same thing in Mee's eyes, too. Their four hands start flitting around my crotch. Then Zhi is sliding her soapy palm up and down the length of my shaft while Mee fondles my scrotum. With a sharp intake of breath, I raise up my head and say:

"You can keep going with that...."

"You so strong," Zhi says, giving my erection a playful tug before she lets go of it.

"So handsome," adds Mee.

So they speak English after all!

"Thank you! You're both very beautiful!" I say with moronic intensity. "Can I get your phone numbers after this? Because as first dates go, this has to be my best one ever."

Zhi just turns on the showerhead and starts treating me like a Mitsubishi again.

“Stand up, please,” says Mee.

When I stand up I’m reminded that my hangover still hasn’t gone away. I feel woozy and weak – on the verge of puking. I know that burping after a good meal is thought to be a compliment in Chinese culture, but I seriously doubt that projectile vomiting while standing naked with an uncontrolled erection would be considered good form at a Chinese dinner table – or after an Asian table shower, for that matter.

The Hu sisters towel me off and lead me out of the bathroom, never knowing how close I came to barfing all over their beautiful black hair.

“Time for *massage-ee...*” Zhi says in a melodious singsong voice, patting the massage table. “Face up, please.”

I flop down on the table like a guileless bull walrus, not even suspecting that I’m about to experience the Four Hands of Hell.



After a few misleadingly sensuous caresses to put me at ease, the Hu sisters suddenly dig their hands into my diaphragm with a savagery that belies their delicate Asian features. I find myself unable to breathe. I try telling them that, but it comes out sounding like:

“Eekat brr-eeek!”

It reminds me of a time just before my second birthday when my mother left me in a playpen with her pet cat, TwinkleToes, while she went off to do some vacuuming. I’m

convinced now that TwinkleToes was thoroughly demonic. He had six toes on each foot and he was mangy, invidious. Seeing me as a rival for my mother's affection, he wished to do me harm. I can't be sure, considering my age, but I think he climbed on top of my blonde toddler head and attempted to smother me. This much was family lore: when my mother returned some twenty minutes later - with her vacuum cleaner roaring, spewing a noxious cloud of dust - she found me with my face pressed against the playpen's netting, turning blue from lack of oxygen, while that infernal feline sat behind me calmly licking its mutant calico paws.

As Zhi and Mee work me over, I feel that same netting pressing against my face again. I struggle to breathe. I must be on the verge of passing out, because I hallucinate my mother's hate-filled face staring down at me from over the blue plastic rim of the playpen. All that seething rage and frustration, directed like a laser beam at tiny, suffocating me.

How could she hate me so much?

The charitable explanation is that my mother had been addicted to painkillers because of her frequent migraine headaches. The painkillers impaired her judgment, often causing her to lose her temper when things weren't going exactly her way. From her perspective, a two-year-old child on the verge of dying was going to put a major crimp in her day. In her favor, though, she dutifully rushed me to a medical clinic, where our family doctor saved my life by giving me a shot of epinephrine. After asking a few pointed questions, the good doctor deduced that I was suffering from asthma and a severe allergy to cat dander. He suggested giving TwinkleToes the boot.

I think that was the day I realized my mother wished I'd never been born. She would provide me with many reminders of that sentiment in the years to come. Throughout my childhood she had no problem telling me that my birth had been an accident – a disastrous mistake.

The pummeling of my diaphragm comes to a halt. I can breathe again. Barely.

“What you see?” Zhi asks me.

“My mother’s face,” I answer, startled that she knows I was hallucinating.

“Mama hate you?”

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

“All boys who mamas hate them, they lungs fill up with sadness, tears. No can breathe right.”

“No mama should hate,” Mee fills in. “If you my boy, I love you – *wǒ ài nǐ* – all the times, no matter what.”

I find myself wishing that Mee could have been my mother, although she seems a bit young for that role. I decide to explore the possibility, anyway:

“Do you mind if I ask you how old you are?”

Mee looks to Zhi and they smile at each other with perfect, pearly white teeth.

“We both sixty-eight,” says Mee.

Somehow, I get the impression she’s not lying – although the physical evidence would seem to suggest otherwise.



“C’mon, ladies! Let’s breathe from your spiritual testicles!”

Those are the first words I hear out of Skeeze's mouth after the Hu sisters help me off the table and support me – one twin under each arm – as I step into my boxer shorts and stagger toward the door. We're taking a break for lunch.

When I limp out of the massage room, I see Skeeze crouching like a sumo wrestler in his white loincloth at the front of what appears to be a slutty yoga class. About twenty women – all of them either stripped down to their underwear or bare-assed naked – stand facing Skeeze, trying to crouch the way he's crouching and breathe the way he's breathing. He's making a big show of grimacing like a dragon as he noisily inhales through his flared nostrils. At the same time, he seems to be doing a weird *t'ai chi* exercise that involves gripping his crotch in a modified (and essentially spastic) Michael Jackson dance routine, sans the moonwalking.

"Feel the *yang fire* climbing up your spine!" Skeeze exhorts his students. "Higher! Higher! all the way to your upper *dantian*. Good! Now let it dribble out of your 'third eye' – your *Ajna chakra* – as you douse it with *yin water*...."

Skeeze folds himself over and trembles from his upraised buttocks. "*Aaaaahhh!*" he sighs, practically kissing the floor. "Exhale. Feel the energy streaming all the way back down to your lower *dantian*. Relax and breathe out of your vaginas."

He turns my way and I flap him a weak wave hello.

"Okay, everyone... I want you to repeat this exercise for the next fifteen minutes. You can all take a break when the music stops." Skeeze waddles over to a Bose stereo system (the same one from his hotel room) and puts on some soothing Chinese music full of birdsong, reedy woodwinds,

twanging lutes, and bonging gongs. Then he waddles over to greet me.

“Crash! You look like shit!” he says, laughing.

It’s a statement of fact. The major portion of my skin is inflamed with welts and splotchy red rashes.

“He cry like teeny baby: *whaa-whaaa!*” Zhi reports to Skeeze.

“Also get sick, like this: *bleeeechk!*” Mee daintily mimes throwing up.

All too true, unfortunately. I hang my head in shame. The Hu sisters’ sadistic laying on of hands had worked me through a fuckload of trauma – from the broken bones I suffered when I fell (or was pushed) from Jimmy’s tree house at the age of six, all the way up through the car crash in Big Sur that left me scarred for life. Those all-too-real recollections had been the cause of the crying and the violent, tabletop barfing fit – which hadn’t been pleasant – but I have to admit that I feel better now, after having gone through it all. At the end of each recalled crisis, Zhi and Mee always seemed to know exactly the right things to say. They gave me Zen-like insights into why I hadn’t been able to let go of those traumatic experiences earlier.

Skeeze grips me by the ears and lifts my head back up, saying, “Dude! It’s nothing to be ashamed of. It happens to everybody! Hell, more than half the people who go in there end up shitting all over themselves. Zhi and Mee are *qigong* ninjas! They’re experts at getting the body to flush out its psychic toxins. You have to cry and shit and puke to purge all that junk from your system. There’s no other way.”

“I had such high hopes after the table shower,” I mutter.

“I’ll bet you did! I remember my first time....”

Zhi makes her eyes go round in mock-horror as she slowly raises her forearm at the elbow and waves her hand around until it resembles that famous blurry photo of the Loch Ness Monster – or perhaps a loose firehouse spraying out of control.

Even though I'm in pain, I have to laugh.

"I know what you've been through," Skeeze tells me. "You deserve a beer to take the edge off. C'mon... we'll go pop some colds ones. There's a quiet room over here where we can talk."

"We go clean up now," says Zhi.

"I'm so sorry about that...."

"Not you fault," Mee says, sweetly squeezing my hand.

"They're used to it," Skeeze assures me. "Besides, if you knew how much they get paid, you wouldn't feel so sorry."

After a stop at the refrigerator to get two big bottles of Chimay Bleue and a couple of beer glasses, Skeeze leads me past the kitchen to Mystery Door Number Three. We enter a dark room lit by candlelight. Once again, there are no windows and the walls are lined with cork. But this time there's a king-sized bed with coppery satin sheets toward the center of the room, instead of a massage table. I also see several gold-framed oval mirrors hanging from the walls.

Skeeze shuts the door behind us and as my eyes adjust to the dimness, I make out a woman in the corner behind us and to our left. She's sitting with her back to us in a Louis XIV chair pulled up close to one of the low-hanging oval mirrors, facing it. She has short red hair and she's wearing a lacey black body stocking that's sheer enough that I can make out her ample pale breasts with their nipples flaring

pink in the reflection of the mirror. The mirror is at such an angle that I can't see her face from where I'm standing. For a giddy moment I think she might be Francesca with a new hairstyle, but then Skeeze says:

"Léa! I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were in here."

"That's okay," Léa answers (*definitely not Francesca...*). "I was hoping you'd show up, actually. I think I'm ready."

"Really?" Skeeze raises his eyebrows. "Do you mind if my friend Crash here stays to observe?"

Léa slumps down in the chair - hunching her pelvis forward on the seat so she can get a good look at me in the mirror. I notice two things right away:

One - she's only semi-attractive, with beady, close-set eyes and a lumpy pierced nose offset by high, fine cheekbones and an appealing grin.

Two - the crotch has been cut away from her body stocking to reveal her as a natural redhead with plump, perfectly formed labia lips.

"He's cute enough," Léa says, staring at me in the mirror as I stare back at her. "I think he might even help some. He can stay."

"Thank you," I say, although I don't know what I'm thanking her for just yet.

"I can tell that Crash is turned on by your beautiful body," Skeeze purrs. "You really look sexy in that body stocking."

"You think so?"

"I'll bet he wants to fuck you right now. I know I do."

What should I do here? Speak up? Volunteer?

I *am* kind of getting a hard-on, watching Léa in the mirror.

“Maybe you could just let us take turns eating your gorgeous pussy,” Skeeze suggests.

Léa squirms around in her chair. Skeeze is obviously getting to her. Her breathing is deep and throaty. It’s almost convulsive, the way she’s gulping down air.

“We’ll do whatever you want,” Skeeze promises her. “We could tag team you. Have you ever done that?”

Her breathing gets faster. I expect Léa to start touching herself, but her hands stay where they are, firmly gripping the arms of the chair. She spreads her legs wider.

“I want you to make me cum,” Léa says, looking at me in the mirror. “Don’t touch me. Just make me cum.”

How am I supposed to do *that*?

Skeeze holds up his left hand to me, like a traffic cop signaling me to halt. Then something very strange happens. He slashes his hand down through the air, as if karate-chopping a ghost, while he shouts:

“SHAMA-LAMA-DING-DANG!!!”

Or words to that effect.... I can’t really say with any certainty *what* he said, because in the next instant my mind went blank as a bucketful of water appeared to hurl itself against the mirror.

“Congratulations, Léa!” Skeeze effuses, wiping spritzed droplets of pussy juice from his goatee. “You’re now an official graduate of the Orgasm at a Distance Institute.”



“So that’s what ‘Oääd’ stands for: ‘*Orgasm at a Distance*’...” I say to Skeeze after Léa leaves the room and

we pop the corks on our beers and pour. “I should have guessed that by now. But those little dots over the ‘ä’s kind of threw me.”

“They’re called umlaut marks,” Skeeze tells me. “They don’t mean anything... I just thought they’d look cool on the stationary. Did you happen to notice how they make our logo look like an erect penis?”

“I hadn’t noticed that, no.”

“Well, check it out next time. The ‘O’ is the nutsack, the double ‘ä’ is the shaft, and the D is the head of the penis.”

“I can see you’ve put a lot of thought into this enterprise of yours, Skeeze,” I say, waxing sarcastic.

He replies in earnest: “I’m hoping to start a franchise. This isn’t set up to be, like, some exclusive little gym for aspiring nymphos. It’s a model that scales. I want to see OääD Institutes all over the world: in Paris, New York, London, Oklahoma City....”

“I can’t really see this flying in Oklahoma.”

“You’re right. Squirting is still illegal there. But it shouldn’t be. No one should ever be harassed or made to feel guilty about their natural sexual urges. Notice I said ‘natural.’ I’m not advocating neurotic perversions.”

“Right – just good old fashioned squirting and telekinetic blowjobs.”

“I’m surprised you still haven’t come around to my way of thinking, Crash,” Skeeze chides me. “In this world, sexual desire reflects our longing for an ecstatic reunion with the True God. It’s a substitute for the soul’s eternal longing to merge its Divine Spark with the infinite. Loving, consensual fucking may be the closest we can get to that state while we’re incarnated in human bodies.”

“What about masturbation?” I ask. “Will that get you closer to the True God, too?” I’m not expecting a serious answer.

“It will if you do it right,” says Skeeze, as if he’s given the matter a lot of thought. “That’s what Léa was doing before we walked in on her... only it’s mostly mental. I teach people how to build up a virtuous cycle of psychic energy that lights up their *chakras* like the New Year’s Eve Ball in Times Square. It turns them into super high quality Loosh accumulators – to use your pet term.”

“So how’s that work?” I’m definitely interested....

“I figured this out on my last trip to the Moon,” Skeeze confides to me. “And I’ll admit that the aliens might’ve given me a little push. But what you do is, you start concentrating on your breathing while you visualize female formless awareness spiraling down out of the multiverse and right into the top of your skull. Then you inhale that female formless awareness, or *yin water*, all the way down through your *chakras* until it pools in your nutsack. If you’re a woman, you have to imagine you have spiritual testicles for that part.”

“I heard you mentioning that.”

“Yeah. We all have compensating male or female sides to our psyches – *anima* or *animus* – so it’s no big deal, really,” Skeeze explains with a professorial air. “There are a few other little tricks to it, but basically, when enough *yin water* has pooled up in your testicles (spiritual or otherwise), it alchemically transduces your jism into electromagnetic energy and light-information – what I call *yang fire*.”

“Are you kidding me? *Alchemical Jizz Transduction!* That sounds like an unreleased Miles Davis album. Or maybe a

Van Morrison song: *Astral Jizz-Light*."

"Whatever, dude. The point is, it works."

"Does it hurt?"

"No! It feels great! As the cycle progresses – *yang fire* blazing up your *chakras*, then *yin water* streaming down, over and over – your testosterone gets converted into DMT, melatonin, serotonin, and oxytocin, which feeds directly into your pineal gland. It's the alchemical equation for Blissful Living Love-Radiance of Infinite Divine Being."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah! It's like a *kundalini* awakening on steroids. It'll make you feel like you're in love with everybody. And you'll feel like getting it on with anyone."

"Well, I'm glad you've got a quasi-scientific theory to back up that happy *kundalini* horseshit. It sounds so much better when you phrase it as DMT-melatonin-serotonin-oxytocin pumping up my pineal gland. Now I totally get it!"

Skeeze knows, of course, that I'm being sarcastic again.

"Okay, so you don't believe me. But you saw what happened with Léa. For women, this process can unleash a tsunami of pent-up pussy squirts. Aren't you the least bit curious about what it might do for a horny guy like you?"

"Of course I am," I admit. "You've got me all stoked to have my very own Orgasm at a Distance. Should I go eat some oysters first?"

"You don't need oysters for this. Just try it, okay? Zhi and Mee will show you how it works." Skeeze tips back his big glass of Chimay ale and finishes off the last of it. "*Ahhh!*" he sighs with a muted belch. "*Liquid lunch!*" He pats the back

of my hand. "Your barf should be all cleaned up by now. They'll be waiting for you. Go get 'em, Tiger!"



Back in the massage room, Zhi and Mee have changed outfits. They're now wearing white satin corsets, white silk panties, and sheer white stockings held up by lacey white garter belts. It's like an Akira Kurosawa remake of *The Merry Widow* – a vision of such surreal loveliness that it makes me feel like Skeeze slipped me a mickey along with a spoonful of powdered tiger penis as an aphrodisiac (and now, after washing it all down with a big brown bottle of Belgian ale, I'm about to attend an alchemical wedding ceremony in a Shanghai brothel while I'm seeing double... or something like that).

"Face down, please," says Mee.

I drop my boxers and climb up on the table, hoping this massage session will be better than the last.

Mee and Zhi have rubbed something on their hands – a waxy, odorless oil or lotion – that makes for a near-frictionless glide as they slide their four palms all up and down the length of my body. It feels amazingly good. If I had a cat's DNA, I'd be purring.

My skin seems to be gathering a charge of sensual static electricity. The Hu sisters begin to guide my breathing, making long, slow strokes along my ribcage as I inhale, then pushing down gently on my spine during the exhale.

"Let *yin water* pour into you," Zhi reminds me.

I visualize a spiraling ethereal waterspout of blue-white light descending from outer space right into the top of my

skull.

The Hu sisters' arms have the rhythm of swaying sea anemones. As I breathe deeper, layers of tension seem to delaminate from me and go floating off into nothingness. I start drifting toward something like sleep. But it's not sleep, because my mind is awake and scrolling through memories – memories I haven't been able to access since the car crash and my bout of amnesia. The whole panoply of my childhood seems to be swimming back to me.

I remember dogpaddling in a kiddie pool with Jimmy when I was two years old, terrorizing our mothers with toddler turds strategically deployed in water and on dry land. A few years later, Jimmy showed me how to use a magnifying glass to melt the face off a G.I. Joe doll. We were the best of friends in those days, chasing after bluebelly lizards, playing poker for candy corn stakes, peeing on my basset hound, Sam, from the limbs of a tall walnut tree. Our mothers thought we were sociopaths in short pants – probably with good reason – but when we were together the world seemed a fascinating place, rich with opportunities for weird adventures. We thought we would grow up to be pirates, or astronauts, or famous anthropologists who attended the Academy Awards wearing fashionable Jivaroan neckties made from human finger bones.

“Feel *yang fire* go up you spine,” Zhi tells me on my next exhalation.

Maybe I'm just fooling myself, but I intuit my *chakras* lighting up, one-by-one, like the starting lights at a dragstrip.

A smoldering sense-memory comes back to me: I'm alone in a hospital bed on my seventh birthday. My parents are in

Spain, attending bullfights, while I'm immobilized, recovering from a collapsed lung and a long bout of pneumonia. I feel an intense need to pee. I reach for the turquoise plastic pitcher on my bedside table, kept there expressly for that purpose. Just as the first squirt from my little dink thrums against the pitcher's bottom, the door to the room swings open and the hospital's staff parades in singing "Happy Birthday!" with a candle-lit cake on a gurney. I'm mortified, but there's no stopping what I've started.

I was known as the Whiz Kid from that day onward.

Why was I left alone with doctors so often? I recall the face of my childhood pediatrician, Doctor Smiley – a bald, bow-tie-wearing buffoon who seriously creeped me out every time I saw him. And I had to see him a lot. Twice a week, for "allergy shots." My mother used to drop me off at his clinic on her way to go shopping at the Fresno Fashion Fair Mall. She would be gone for hours.

Doctor Smiley had a basement laboratory and bad things happened to me down there. That fat fuck went at me with manacles, straightjackets, experimental drugs, Grand Guignol nightmares on videotape, electrostimulation of my brain and genitals, holographically projected hallucinations, chemical comas, spin programming, hypnotic suggestions recited over multi-channel cochlear implants, Eagles songs played backward... and VD photos – he loved to show me photographs from his collection of late-stage venereal disease victims.

Later, when Lloyd told me about the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, I thought to myself that if they hadn't already found a director for that infamous U.S. Public Health

Service study, Doctor Smiley would have been just the guy for it.

I can feel myself getting agitated – muscles tensing up, my heart beating faster. I want to go back and destroy that predatory motherfucker. Then, as if from a great distance, I hear Zhi whispering in my ear:

“Put out yang fire with yin water.”

Visualizing that ethereal waterspout from the universe pouring like an inverted *aurora borealis* into the top of my skull, I start to calm down. Are my memories of Doctor Smiley’s pediatric torture chamber real? I sense that they are, but I have no way of knowing for certain. I don’t know if I’m remembering something that happened, recalling a particularly vivid dream, or just making shit up. Maybe history, or the past, exists in a constant state of flux. Instead of one knowable and inviolable history, there could be multiple versions of history, constantly vying to overwrite previous versions, resulting in different historical outcomes. Call it quantum mnemonics.

Could anyone really do things like that to a child?

I flash on the Nazis – Josef Mengele and his whole sick crew of SS physicians. So, yes, there’s an historical precedent. People have done those things and worse to children. But it isn’t supposed to happen in America, is it?

My body involuntarily shudders.

“You see little boy inside?” Mee asks me.

“Yes. I saw myself as a little boy,” I tell her. She seems to have no trouble reading my mind.

“You take care him now,” Mee says, sounding very serious. “You big strong man. Say to little boy, ‘I take care you now. No more bad things happen.’”

“Okay.”

“Say it!” Mee insists. “‘I take care you now...’.”

“I’ll take care of you now.”

“Say, ‘No more bad things happen...’.”

“No more bad things will happen.”

“Good!”

Jesus Christ, Mee’s English sucks... and yet I’m almost moved to tears. I’ve never addressed my inner child before. The concept always seemed hokey to me. In spite of that, saying the words actually produced a strong upwelling of emotion that I hadn’t been expecting and – *I’m having a hard time admitting this* – that little boy inside me seemed grateful that I was finally telling him I’d take charge and become his protector.

“Turn ovah, please,” says Zhi, patting me on the rump.

I roll over onto my back. I don’t have a hard-on this time, but I’m not exactly soft, either. The Hu sisters look down at me, their brown eyes brimming with love and compassion. They have me convinced that the Far East produces the most exquisitely beautiful women in the world. Exchanging coy smiles, they lean forward and pull the lacquered chopsticks from their hair buns.

Their thick, gorgeous black hair cascades straight down past their shoulders and settles in the air above me with the dangling ends tickling my upper thighs.

It goes without saying that I find the sensation erotic.

“*Yang fire* rise up again,” says Mee.

She’s got that right.

“Relax. Close eyes,” advises Zhi.

They guide my breathing again: stroking my ribs, pressing on my sternum. Their wonderful hair dances across every exposed part of me.

I am thunderously erect. But with my eyes closed, I can't tell if the Hu sisters plan on doing anything about that.

Another memory roils through my mind like smoke from a house fire slowly crawling across a ceiling. I've just returned to my childhood home after seeing a fat lady psychic in a rumored whorehouse. I'm sixteen years old. Slightly drunk. I see myself in a darkened room, standing beside a crib. It stands out from the shadows like a circus cage in the dim illumination from a Winnie-the-Pooh nightlight. A little boy stands inside it clutching the top rail, bawling. He appears to be about three or four years old. For a moment, I think I'm seeing my inner child again, but then I hear myself saying, "Derek, what's wrong?" as I gently pick him up.

Derek. I have a brother. A little brother named Derek!

I'm at once overjoyed and appalled. *How the hell did I forget my own brother for seven years?* Something's wrong here. These strange, knotted mysteries from my past need some unraveling.

I decide it's time for me to take a trip to Kingsburg.

As I open my eyes with that new resolve, I see that the Hu sisters have removed their corsets. Their panties have gone missing as well. Only the garter belts remain with their sheer white stockings. (*How is that even possible?*) Both sisters have the full, pert breasts of college cheerleaders. I want to kiss them, desperately. Instead, they move my arms to the side of the massage table and place my hands between their naked thighs. My fingers slide right up inside

their warm, wet slits, almost unbidden. I feel plugged in to a deep, universal life current. Fantastic jolts of energy shudder up my arms and fill my chest with buoyant electricity.

“You like?” asks Zhi as she and her sister give their boobs a shake.

“I like!” I answer as their hands skate tantalizingly close to my engorged cock. My stomach goes tight with anticipation. It’s impossible for me to believe that Zhi and Mee are old enough to be grandmothers.

The inner yoga of *yang fire* and *yin water* cycling through my *chakras* has made my entire body feel erect, filled almost to bursting with blood and lewd juices – especially my pineal gland. The phrase ‘mental masturbation’ has taken on a whole new meaning for me today. I feel like I’m on the verge of ejaculating a 30-foot jet of semen. If Skeeze’s quasi-scientific theories are correct, I must be alchemically converting my testosterone into DMT-melatonin-serotonin-oxytocin like a wild man.

Disregarding the matter of scientific validity, he’s right about the end results:

God, I’m in love with everybody! And *Holy Fuck!* I feel like getting it on with anyone! But I especially want to get it on with Zhi and Mee, who have leaned over to position their elegant Asian lips near the throbbing tip of my dick.

“Could you, *uhm...*” I try to direct the action, but find I’m at a loss for words.

Mee and Zhi look at each other and smile. Then, on the count of three, they inhale great lungfuls of air and blow, just like they’re blowing out a big pink candle on a birthday cake.

That sudden blast of warm air sets off a weird internal reaction in me. As Skeeze will explain it to me later, it caused my *yang fire* to vaporize my accumulated pool of *yin water*, resulting in a combustible *yin-yang* vapor-mixture, which was then set off by a spark of yogic heat. At that point I basically just *exploded* in a huge burst of Blissful Living Love-Radiance of Infinite Divine Being.

According to Skeeze, I attained *xiān* status at that point. I still don't know what that means, but *Man, it was intense!* To paraphrase Charlotte Bronte's famous coda in *Jane Eyre*:
Reader, my splooge hit the ceiling.



OBE-369: EKSTASIS

Death will prove to you that your mind exists beyond your body. Ekstasis can do that, too, while you're still alive.

Freud did a pretty great job of linking the human mind with a personal unconscious located inside the body. That unconscious mind often goes haywire, resulting in anxiety, depression, and dark impulses to kill your dad and fuck your mom (or vice versa, in Jung's opinion, if you're under the sway of an unresolved Electra complex).

Ekstasis, in contrast, links the human mind with a superconscious Mind located outside the body. That superconscious Mind can heal the psyche and bestow grace and enlightenment. It's comparable to the concept of God as most people understand it, but for some it can also include spirit communications from the Other Side, or just about any other encounter with a disembodied intelligence beyond the scope of the conscious self. Jung's daimon, Philemon, would qualify as a channel of communication from the superconscious Mind, for example.

According to Plotinus of Lycopolis, who's the original authority on the subject, ekstasis is the apotheosis of human consciousness. It was thought to be the highest possible attainment of the Ancient Greek Human Potential Movement. Ekstasis can hook you up with a vast, oceanic matrix of information, as opposed to your own personal wading pool of consciousness. You'll find yourself knowing things that you had no precedent for knowing, seeing

things that were previously unseen, hearing things that... well, you get the idea. Obviously, there's a fine line between ekstasis and psychosis.

Gordon's first encounter with ekstasis occurred while he was in a Divine Coma following the car crash in Big Sur that killed the three of us. We'd never experienced ekstasis before our premature deaths, so when we found out that our minds still functioned on the Other Side we were, quite naturally, ecstatic. Gordon, however, was allowed a preview of coming attractions while still maintaining a connection to his battered, comatose body. To decide whether he should live or die, he went through a Life Review with his daimon and his True Self, both of which are essentially future Gordons - refined, spiritually evolved Gordons - with greater access to the One, the True God, the Good, the Divine, or whatever you want to call that ultimate destination that we're all striving toward.

But let's not get bogged down in fuzzy metaphysics.... When he emerged from his Divine Coma, what mattered most to Gordon was that he no longer feared death. He knew his consciousness would survive no matter how he died. He knew he was a part of something much greater than the puny domain of his earthly thoughts and deeds. It was humbling to realize how limited he was, incarnated in a human body - not much more than a vulnerable sack of thinking meat - but at the same time it was liberating to know that beyond death (or in ekstasis) there was much more consciousness yet to be experienced.

After his Life Review, we were allowed to hang out with Gordon in his Divine Coma Waiting Room until he emerged from it back on Earth thirty-three days later (which seemed like no time at all to us in the timeless, eternal present on

the Other Side). By then, we three had become one, but Gordon still recognized us as the spiritual amalgamation of his old friends D.H., Skip, and Twinker. We made a pact with him. In exchange for helping him here and there with his human life from our superior vantage point on the Other Side, Gordon agreed to let us use his body as an interdimensional portal, so we could experience temporal, matter-based life on Earth again whenever we felt like it. This is a privilege allowed to very few of the newly dead, and if Gordon's True Self hadn't backed us up on the deal, there's no way it ever would've happened.

No one from the Other Side is allowed to go hitchhiking on a human without permission from that human's True Self first. Most True Selves won't allow it, because it freaks out their human incarnations way too much. But Gordon is different. Whenever we show up inside him, he just treats it as a mild case of angelic possession. He's like, "Okay, whatever... do your thing." For our part, we always make sure not to do it when he's driving or operating heavy machinery. But occasionally we'll sneak in there while he's having sex. That's big fun for the bodiless – believe us.

We were in there when Gordon's splooge hit the ceiling during Zhi and Mee's massage session. That was so fucking great! It's one of our favorite experiences to revisit. We really owed him after that one, so we decided to reintegrate Gordon's memories for him, providing him with total recall of everything that had happened to him during his human lifetime. That meant no more alters, no more mind control compartmentalization. No more being screwed around by Doctor Smiley and his shadowy superiors.

We could have done that right out of the gate, when Gordon emerged from his Divine Coma, but our first duty was to keep Gordon's human incarnation safe. And he wouldn't have been safe if he'd returned to Kingsburg right after he got out of the hospital (as he would have, knowing that his younger brother, Derek, was still in the care - if you can call it that - of their rage-prone mother). Hence the amnesia, hence Esalen....

Anyway, Gordon needed time to grow into his powers of remote viewing and remote influencing, so that he could be trusted to use them in ethically responsible ways. The temptation to exploit those powers for egoistic ends would have been too great for a traumatized teenager who'd just seen three of his closest friends murdered. (Life is short, so why not cut a few corners to get what I want? he might have thought.) But now, at 24, Gordon is mature enough to use his rare gifts wisely. So from here on out, he'll be operating with a fully integrated mind - something that can't be said of most human beings. Humans, as a general rule, have always been prone to denial, repression, willful ignorance, and indiscriminant gorging on media-fed disinformation.

Meanwhile, we'll be on the psychic sidelines cheering Gordon on - while providing all the help that the multiverse allows.

KINGSBURG CALLING

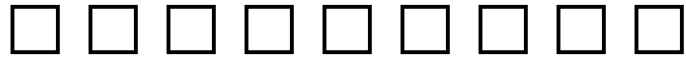
I didn't leave Brussels for Kingsburg right away. Instead, I spent several aphrodisiacal weeks getting to know the OääD Institute's squirt-aspiring students. The OääDettes, as Skeeze referred to them, took me to their multiple bosoms. For their lascivious purposes, I became both class pet and crash test dummy. They doted on me while sorely abusing my body. Toward the end of their enthusiastic tutelage, I had been transformed from an ordinary lover into a penile virtuoso.

Practice makes perfect, as they say....

Recounting the salacious details of my OääD exploits would send my prose into hyper-pornographic mode (and there's been enough of that already, some might say), so I'll refrain from further description. But know that among my many other lewd accomplishments, I learned how to make a lady squirt - both manually and from a distance. In fact, my latent powers of remote influencing seemed to be coming to the fore again.

I was a new man by the time I left. Snake-lean and rock-hard, I felt confident that I could make Kayleigh bite her pipe in half the next time I saw her. But a return trip to Amsterdam held little appeal for me. I wanted to know who I was and where I'd come from before I asked the next woman to share her life with me.

For that existential Pandora's box, Kingsburg seemed to hold the key.



I'm in a window seat at the back of a twin-engine turboprop out of LAX, half-listening to Bruce Hornsby banging away at his piano as he sings "The Way It Is" in the shoddy airline headphones. I feel glum, bordering on maudlin, as the plane begins its descent through a scalding blue sky toward FAT – the Fresno Air Terminal. Several thousand feet below, the patchwork agricultural terrain of the San Joaquin Valley is just as I remember it from when I used to fly in the co-pilot's seat of my father's red-and-white Cessna 172 as a boy.

FAT – what an embarrassing acronym for an airport.... It occurs to me that fatty tissue is where a body stores the toxins that can't be flushed from its system. Losing weight too quickly can be lethal for certain animals – man included – due to the flood of poisons released by metabolizing fat once ketosis sets in. I hope that's not what I'm in for, metaphorically, by reassimilating the toxic scenes from my childhood.

Turn poison into medicine... I tell myself, recalling the words of some self-appointed sage passing through Esalen.

Once I'm on the ground, I rent a gunmetal grey Nissan Pathfinder from Hertz and head for what used to be home, twenty miles southeast of the airport. The August morning air is hot and somehow *thick*, as if it has weight to it that air elsewhere lacks. It's probably due to all the airborne pesticides and plowed up fertilizers that facilitate the enormous amount of farming that goes on in the area. Kingsburg, after all, is *The Raisin Capital of the World*. My allergies are already acting up – itchy eyes, clogging

sinuses. I feel like I should be making this fucking trip in a hazmat suit.

Hurtling along the cracked asphalt highway called Golden State Boulevard, I pass palm trees, dusty oleander bushes, miles and miles of grape vineyards, and finally – on the outskirts of Kingsburg – the Sunny Maid Raisins factory. My grandmother's illustrated likeness had been displayed on the Sunny Maid Raisins boxes for thirty-three years, until some upstart ad agency decided to repackage the brand in the early seventies. I haven't thought of my Grandma Helen in a long time – probably not since the crash in Big Sur. That's seems odd, considering that she was the only adult in my extended family who was consistently kind to me while I was growing up. It's almost as if I'd been unconsciously trying to prevent this return trip to Kingsburg by only allowing myself to remember the bad parts of my childhood, and none of the good.

I pull off the old highway and navigate the familiar grid of small town streets, flinching every now and then as I'm reminded of the many small but stupid things I said and did during my gawky adolescence (although my idea to do a cover album of *Led Zeppelin IV* using only twanging rubber bands, drums made out of paint cans, and an Ampex 8-track recorder still strikes me as having potential...).

I decide to stop in to see my grandmother before I go anywhere else. She lives just four doors down from my childhood home. Even when I was in kindergarten, I used to walk over to see her by myself whenever I felt like it. We'd sit together in the black swivel chairs in her kitchen, where she'd ply me with sugar-sweetened cups of coffee (which always made me feel pleasantly sleepy) while filling me in

on all the latest neighborhood gossip, as if I were already an adult.

Later, if I begged her, she'd tell me stories about what my father had been like as a boy. He'd been a hero to me in those days – a six-foot-seven-inch giant striding the earth. His boyhood adventures seemed to have a mythic, larger-than-life quality that mine distinctly lacked. My dad raised and branded his own herd of cattle to earn spending money, beginning in the third grade. He jumped across irrigation ditches, Evel Knievel-style, in a souped-up go-kart. He qualified for his pilot's license when he turned fifteen. It didn't occur to me at the time that my grandmother might have been exaggerating. She was the only person I knew who never stooped to manipulating me with lies and sarcastic denigration.

Surely Grandma Helen will be able to prepare me, better than anyone, for whatever weirdness I might encounter when I confront my mother again after an absence of seven years.



My grandmother's modest ranch house looks like it's had a fresh coat of Harvest Gold paint, but otherwise it's unchanged. As I walk up to the front porch and ring the doorbell, I find myself hoping that I don't send the old broad into cardiac arrest by coming back from the dead, as it were. In her favor, Grandma Helen, as I remember her, is so settled in her twilight years that she's become pretty much unflappable. Senility had her seeing calico squids on her backyard fence posts and she simply didn't give a shit.

I think she can handle me doing a Lazarus number on her.

A middle-aged woman with dovish brown eyes and a graying pixie cut opens the door. She's wearing cerulean blue hospital scrubs, so I just automatically assume she's my grandmother's nurse.

"Hi. Is Helen home?" I ask. She doesn't answer right away, so I fill in by saying: "I'm her grandson."

Still no immediate answer. *Is she bed-ridden?* I wonder. *I hope she's not too far gone to recognize me. How old would she be now? Late-seventies? Early-eighties?*

Is this woman deaf?

"I'm sorry," the woman finally says. Her eyes are infinitely kind. "Helen doesn't live here anymore. She died about four years ago. We bought her house."

"Oh." My eyes instantly flush with hot tears, but I manage to keep them from rolling down my cheeks. "I should have known that, but I - I've sort of been out of touch."

"You're Derek's older brother, aren't you?" the kind woman says.

I just nod, doing my best not to lose it.

"I can tell. You look just like him. Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"It's a long story."

"It would almost have to be, right?"

I nod again.

The woman looks up at me with a bird-like tilt to her head. She's short and plump, like a sparrow. A thought seems to have occurred to her. She says, "It might please you to know that your little brother has always said you were still alive."

"He did?"

"I just thought he was doing it on principle. I don't think he wants to believe anything your mother tells him. If you don't mind my saying, she's been pretty hard on the little guy."

"I'm not surprised."

"I just saw him in the alley a few minutes ago. You still might be able to catch him if you go out the back gate. He's on the garbage truck."

"Really?"

"Stan's been like a father to him. C'mon..." she says, taking my hand, "you can cut through the house."



A grimy white garbage truck is at the end of the alley, just turning the corner behind my old house. I take off at a run to catch up to it. When I get to the corner, I see the truck idling a few yards ahead next to the cinderblock wall that runs along the Hovnanian's backyard - our old neighbors across the alley. A man in a navy blue mechanic's jumpsuit steps down from the truck's cab to pick up a galvanized trashcan set out by the back gate. He has the pomaded dyed black hair of an aging Elvis Presley impersonator and pale blue eyes that crinkle like the Tin Man's as they take me in. The name *Stan* is sewn in red stitching on the jumpsuit's left breast pocket. After he empties the trashcan, he takes off a filthy suede work glove and extends his palm to me with a wry smile.

"Well, I'll be..." Stan breathes as we shake hands. He turns and shouts: "Derek, get your butt over here! Your brother's come home!"

A skinny, tow-headed kid of about ten hops out of the cab and runs over to see us. He's wearing worn-out blue jeans and a faded Pink Floyd T-shirt that originally belonged to me.

"Gordon!" he yells, with the biggest gap-toothed grin I've ever seen. He leaps right into my arms. I stagger with the sudden weight of him and hug him tight to keep us both from falling over.

After I spin Derek around a few times and tell him how glad I am to see him, Stan lights up a cigarette and asks, "So where you been, stranger?"

"I was in a car crash," I try to explain. "It put me in a coma for a while and screwed with my memory."

"I knew you were alive!" Derek says, pumping his fist in the air as I set him down. "Mom's gonna be so pissed!"

"Is she around?" I ask with some trepidation.

"I think she's at the grocery store."

"So you're just out cruising around with Stan here?"

"You don't remember me, do you?" Stan asks me.

"Like I said, my memory's a little whacked."

"You used to call me Stan the Garbage Man. I was drivin' this route back when you were about Derek's age here. You don't remember drinkin' hopper juice with me?"

"Hopper juice?"

"My own homeopathic elixir. I never get sick," Stan boasts. "Haven't had so much as a cold in over ten years."

"Me neither..." Derek volunteers, "except for allergies."

"I'm workin' on that," says Stan. "I'm thinkin' a little disco rice might help."

"Yuck," says Derek.

"What's disco rice?" I ask.

"Come on over here..." Stan says to me as he walks toward the back of the garbage truck, "and I'll show you."

He pulls a lever with a red ball on the end of it and the garbage truck's maw opens up with a loud mechanical groan. Trash bumpily rolls about and a stench of rotting kitchen waste and old lawn clippings wafts our way. My nose tells me there must be some dog shit in the mix, as well – or maybe an entire dog's rotting corpse.

Stan puts his right glove back on and starts rooting around in the trash until he finds what he's looking for. "Here's some." He points. "Disco rice."

I peer into the garbage truck and see a putrefying chicken carcass in a hollowed out area of the compacted trash pile. It looks like it was once one of those take-out rotisserie chickens from a convenience store, but now it's half-eaten and crawling with tiny white maggots. Stan leans over and blows on the maggots. They stand up and wriggle at him in response. It looks like they're dancing.

Disco rice. I get it.

"And what's hopper juice?" I'm almost afraid to ask.

Derek looks on with something resembling pride as Stan reaches deep into a pocket on his jumpsuit and fishes out a small, golden-rimmed shot glass with an Old Grand-Dad Whiskey logo on it.

"At the end of the day, your average garbage truck gets filled up with over three times its volume from all the stuff it collects along its route," Stan explains to me. "All that crap has to get mashed up and squeezed down so we can take it to the dump. But all that mashin' and squeezin' makes its

own juice at the bottom of the hopper – right here, see?” Stan bangs on the side of the garbage truck and unplugs a rubber bung. A foul-smelling liquid starts streaming out onto the ground.

“Hopper juice,” Stan says, filling the shot glass from the stream with a debonair flick of his wrist. He holds the brimming glass up to his pale blue eye with a “*To Your Health!*” gesture and then knocks it back in a single gulp.

“Gross, huh?” says Derek.

My thoughts exactly.

Before I can say anything, Derek takes the empty shot glass from Stan and fills it up for himself.

“Derek. No!”

“I do this all the time,” he says, gulping down the putrid amber liquid.

“And you don’t puke? Or shit your brains out?”

“Not anymore.”

I have to admit that the kid looks healthy – far healthier than I was at that age. *But still.*

“Your little brother’s one heck of a go-getter,” Stan tells me. “He can out-hustle kids twice his size.”

“That’s great!”

“He’s done pretty good for himself, growing up without a dad – and with your mom the way she is.”

“The way she is... meaning what?” I ask, although I can guess.

“Crazy,” Derek answers.

“A bonafide bitch on wheels,” Stan elaborates.

“Oh shit! Here she comes now!” Derek says as an avocado green Cadillac Eldorado pulls into the alleyway.

My mother leans on the Cadillac’s horn. The garbage truck is blocking the entrance to her garage.

“I better get movin’!” Stan says with a jaunty wave. “Gordon, it’s been great seein’ you again,” he says as he climbs back into the garbage truck’s cab. “Derek, I’ll swing by and pick you up again tomorrow, bright an’ early, okay?”

“I’ll be ready,” says Derek.

The Cadillac’s horn is still blaring. I can see my mother’s venomous scowl through the windshield as Stan backs up the truck to get out of her way.

I don’t feel ready for this at all.



“If you came here looking for money, you’re not getting any.”

That’s how my mother greets me upon getting out of her Cadillac. No hugs, no kisses, no teary-eyed confessions of joy. Just the stone-cold recognition that I am, indeed, her first and eldest son, and that I’ve had the unmitigated gall not to be dead these past seven years.

In my mother’s scathing opinion, which she soon makes clear, I’m neither the Prodigal Son nor Lazarus. I’m just a potential moocher, a wannabe freeloader – in short, a bum seeking handouts.

“I worked hard for my money and I’m spending every last penny,” she continues to rant. “You kids can make your own way in the world, just like I did.”

I don't recall my mother ever holding a job in her life, aside from being responsible for some light housekeeping and helping out with the inventory down at the lumberyard for a week or two each year around Easter. As far as I know, she inherited all her money – a huge pile of it from my father who, in turn, inherited a huge pile from *his* father. If I could get paid millions just for emptying the dishwasher, vacuuming, and counting out nuts and bolts for a few weeks every spring, I'd count myself lucky. And I'd certainly feel more charitable toward my own children. But I don't argue with her.

"I've been getting along just fine without your money," I say instead. "I thought you might be glad to see me." A lie, but I want to make the point that in most families gladness might come easily, given the circumstances.

"You don't call or write for seven years, and now I'm supposed to be just thrilled when you finally show up?" My mother glares at me. "You were always such a conceited little twerp. What did you expect me to do? Dance for joy?"

The phrase *soul-killing shrew* comes to mind. I think Lloyd used it once in reference to his ex-wife. It would seem to apply here, as well. My mother's default mode has always been set to *Humiliate*.

"Look, I'm sorry I just disappeared the way I did," I say to her, "but I was in a serious car accident. It put me in a coma. And when I came out of it, I had amnesia."

"For *seven years*?"

She has me there. I deliberately chose to hide from my past, and now I'm paying the price.

"I didn't remember Stan the Garbage Man until just a few minutes ago," I tell her honestly.

“Now you’re comparing me to your little brother’s ding-a-ling garbage pal? Really? Your own mother? After all I gave up for you?”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” I protest. My thoughts are balling up with a sick sort of anxiety that I haven’t felt since... well, since childhood. Why do we always become children again in the presence of our parents? I’m twenty-four years old and at 6’2” I tower over my mother – a dumpy little woman in a custard yellow polyester pantsuit and grimy white sandals – but in my mind she still has all the malevolent power of a fairy tale snow queen who can turn lost boys into ice sculptures with just a few magic words.

She still hasn’t said my name.

Derek speaks up for me. “Why can’t you just be happy that Gordon’s not dead?” he asks her.

“He made me *think* he was dead,” Cynthia spits back at him. “In some ways, that’s even worse. But I got used to it. I moved on with my life. I didn’t need him. But now here he is again. Well, *la-di-da....*”

“Maybe I should go.”

“That’s right. Just run away. Abandon me. That’s all you’re good for! Just like your father.” She’s crying now. I can’t tell if they’re crocodile tears or the real deal.

I realize with a shudder that we’re standing in the very spot where my father’s dive-bombing Cessna passed over the alley before crashing into the side of our house, killing him upon impact. I saw it happen. I was the first person on the scene. I found his mutilated body in the den, still strapped into the upright pilot’s chair. The image is etched upon my mind in hyperrealistic detail. I see it again now

even though I'd rather not (*my dad's shoulder sockets and what's left of his thighs oozing a pinkish-red jelly, his eyes wide open in a stare that seems to be pleading with me, the lower half of his jaw gone, his upper gums weirdly exposed, and his tongue just hanging there like a flower stamen...*).

In that strange, suspended moment, I remember the compassion that Mee and Zhi showed me in Brussels – and I find myself doing something that I never would have imagined. I take a step forward and hug my mother. Really lean into her, like I mean it.

And maybe I do.

Maybe I can forgive her.

It's a cheap psychological insight, but I recognize that despite everything my mother did to drive me away – the borderline psychotic rages, the sassy declarations that I was an unwanted child, the instances of undisguised hatred – in her mind, *she's* the one who feels abandoned. And that emotional truth, *for her*, trumps all the nightmarish things she said and did to me in the past, which she would never admit to, anyway.

My mother sobs against my shoulder like a sea lion.

Then she slaps me – *hard* – and beats her bony fists against my chest, crying: “*Damn you, damn you, damn you!*”

You have to understand... we were never a hugging family.



“Well, that was weird.”

That's Derek, addressing me from the passenger seat in my rented Nissan Pathfinder.

"It was weird, wasn't it?" I say, turning the key in the ignition. "It would've been more like Mom if she'd chased me off the front lawn with a Weed Eater."

"Once she hit me on the head with a pooper-scooper," Derek reminisces. "I got seventeen stitches and a real bad infection." He leans over and parts his blonde hair to show me the scar running along the back of his scalp.

"*Jesus!*" I exclaim. The scar still shows puckered flesh where the stitches pulled everything back together. It looks like the crude handiwork of a mortician, rather than something you'd see from a competent plastic surgeon. But I don't want to make Derek feel self-conscious about it, so I refrain from further comment, aside from saying, "Afterward, did she cry and say, 'Look what you made me do!' like it was all your fault somehow?"

"How'd you guess?"

"I had some similar experiences...."

Cynthia was always more concerned about her own well-being than about any physical or emotional damage she might have inflicted on others. Her unholy reign of emotional terrorism had its roots in a hellacious borderline personality disorder. My childhood was just one of many scorched battlefields in her covert war with the world – a war I didn't understand and had no chance of winning. As I grew older, I learned to tune out her frightening rampages by dissociating. She couldn't hurt me if I wasn't in my body, I reasoned. The only downside to that coping mechanism was that the ensuing depersonalization left me feeling like *I* was the crazy one.

Derek is looking at me like he wants me to elaborate, but there were so many Mom Flipping Out incidents that I don't know where to begin.

"I'm sorry I left you alone with her for so long," I say, feeling like a coward for hiding away from our mother's malevolence and *staying away* for all those years.

"It's not your fault," says my big-hearted little brother. "I'm just glad she's letting us hang out together."

My mother and I had reached a quick agreement in the alleyway after our unprecedented hug. She didn't want me in her house - in fact, she wasn't sure she wanted any further contact with me at all - but I could get to know Derek, since we were siblings. I could even help her out by driving him to his three o'clock allergy shot appointment in Fresno, because she had some business to take care of with our Uncle Gerald down at the lumberyard.

I readily agreed to become Derek's chauffeur. Cynthia wrote down an address on a scrap of paper from her purse and handed it to me. Then she told me to get out of her sight.

It was barely noon. We had a few hours to kill before we had to be in Fresno, so Derek and I decided to drive around Kingsburg together. For me, it would be a negative nostalgia tour, dredging up old memories that were more bitter than sweet. For Derek, it was a chance to get to know his long-lost brother while avoiding his mother's Medea-like wrath.

"Did you go to Grandma Helen's funeral?" I ask him as we pull away from the curb in front of our grandmother's old house.

"I think they just burned her body at the nursing home," Derek answers. At ten, he's probably not the most reliable family chronicler. "I didn't see her much after you left," he says. "Mom and Uncle Gerald put her in that place almost right away. It was creepy there – and it stunk like piss."

My grandmother's house had been my only safe harbor while I was navigating the familial shitstorms of my youth. My father, for the most part, was incommunicative and uninvolved during my upbringing. He was too invested in the marriage to see my mother's abusiveness, much less put a stop to it. Or maybe he just couldn't be bothered. *Poor me, right?* But then I think about how much worse it must have been for Derek: a dead father, a hostile mother, and no grandmother to stand in for the world of sane, loving adults.

He must feel like an orphaned enemy of the state. No wonder he's hanging out with Stan the Garbage Man.

"Where should we go?" I ask him.

"I dunno," Derek answers. "There's not much to do around here. But if you're hungry, we could go to The Red Rooster or A&W."

"Does The Red Rooster still make those really good chorizo sandwiches?"

"Yep. Me and Stan sometimes go there for lunch on our way out to the dump."

I mentally chart a course that will take us to The Red Rooster Drive-In – which, if I remember correctly, is out near the Del Monte fruit-canning factory on the edge of town. Along the way, we drive past the house that James lived in with his parents on 14th Street. Thinking of the sleepovers I used to have with James in his spooky

basement bedroom, I ask Derek if he happens to remember him.

"Was he one of your buddies that died in the car crash?"

"No. That was Skip, D.H., and Twinker. James is still alive. Only everyone called him Jimmy back then. He used to live in that house we just passed. We've been sharing a place together for the last few years in Cambria."

"Where's that?"

"Out on the coast, near Big Sur."

"Sounds great."

"Yeah, it's a lot nicer than here. You should come visit. James wrote a vampire book while he was living with me that sold for a bunch of money, so he just moved out and I've got some extra room. You could stay with me until school starts up again in the fall."

"That'd be cool! Do you think Mom'd let me?"

"I have no idea... but we could try asking her."

Derek seems to like the idea. Looking out the windshield at the white church steeple looming ahead of us, he whispers to himself: *Yes!*

I recognize that particular steeple as belonging to the Kingsburg United Methodist Church, scene of my desolate childhood encounters with Sunday school. Our maternal grandfather had served as a minister there during my mother's teens, so I was forced to attend Bible study classes every Sunday despite my avowals of theological solidarity with my father – a lazy atheist who refused to attend church services even during Christmas and Easter.

I once overheard my mother complaining to my father that *her* father, the self-righteous Reverend, had forced her

to eat her own pet rabbit for dinner when she was a little girl. Supposedly, floppy-eared little Blackie was skinned alive, gutted, and braised because the family was church-mouse poor and they had no other sources of protein. In reality, the Reverend had a few million dollars worth of stocks and bonds squirreled away in secret brokerage accounts. But my mother only made that discovery after both of her parents had died and she saw their will, which distributed the millions among various Christian charities and right-wing think tanks. Cynthia “got zilch” as she put it – just a twenty-two-year-old mobile home in a Vacaville trailer park and a fake diamond brooch. It pissed her off to no end. She ranted that her father had been a bible-thumping hypocrite, a bilking evangelist with a jaunty tattoo of the Princeton tiger on his ass who routinely got arrested for soliciting prostitutes near the Santa Cruz boardwalk. More snake than saint, to hear her tell it – although you’d never know it by listening to his Sunday homilies.

My early distrust of religion was probably seeded right then and there. I wonder if I should tell Derek the story.

Not yet... I decide. I’ll try to get him to Cambria first.

My maternal grandfather found good company in Kingsburg, a reactionary little town of square-jawed bigots and mean, pinch-faced old church ladies who believed their way of living was the *only* way – and all others would soon be wiping smoke from their eyes in the fiery pits of hell. The thought gladdened them. As in so many other one-crop regions, the intolerant and xenophobic citizens of Kingsburg seemed out-of-touch with the wider world, about thirty years behind both the times and the curve. As a child, I remember their folksy displays of neighborliness masking

a deeper and truer countenance of farm town fascism. Even more than they wanted to convince me of their opinions, they wanted to deprive me of my own.

We were a long way from Amsterdam and the notion that sex and drugs were the most wholesome, healthful, and even spiritual things that money could buy.

I make a right turn onto Draper Street – Kingsburg’s main drag – where for several blocks the storefronts are jammed shoulder-to-shoulder on both sides. They rise above the usual farm town uniformity by having wide sidewalks and distinctive facades of vaguely Scandinavian-looking design: fake half-timbering, leaded glass windows, and gaily-painted business signs in Old English script (The Swedish Sweets Shoppe, Jacobsen’s Pharmacie, Leif’s Olde Tyme Pizza Shacke, Viking Market, Ling’s Svenske-Chinese Dry Cleaning and Lucky Gifts, etcetera). Not only is Kingsburg *The Raisin Capital of the World*, it’s also known as *The Swedish Village*.

Every year in May, Kingsburg hosts a Swedish Festival to celebrate the town’s once-large population of Swedish immigrants (now mostly supplanted by Mexicans and fast-breeding Portuguese families). Plywood Dala horses – in snappy acrylic paint jobs of yellow, blue, and orange – are affixed to every lamppost. Swedish polka music plays from loudspeakers on the street corners from noon until dusk. Big-titted high school cheerleaders in traditional, cleavage-enhancing Swedish gowns dance around a Maypole. One of them will be crowned the festival’s Swedish Queen (an honor our Grandma Helen once held, even though she was married at the time and thus should have been disqualified). During the parade that follows, fez-wearing Shriners can be seen tearing around on miniature go-karts

- porcine, belly-bloated, and often viciously drunk. Moose-antler-wearing Rotarians, posing as Vikings, hurl candy at cowering little children from a cardboard Norse longship bedecked with cartoonish war shields. And there's always some old biddy waving from the rumble seat of a goose-honking Model T while the local radio announcer venerates her as Kingsburg's oldest living resident. She's usually dead by next spring.

"I used to go flying with Dad in his Cessna when I was about your age," I tell Derek. "Sometimes we'd buzz Draper Street right here. We'd get so low that people would come out of the stores to see what was going on."

"Sounds fun."

"It was. People would say, 'There goes Mal and his boy, Gordon.' It was almost like being a celebrity."

"I wish I'd been able to do that," says Derek. "I've never even been up in a plane. Mom won't let me fly, after what happened."

"I never told her this, but I was supposed to be flying with Dad on the day he died," I confess. "But we got into an argument about something I wrote when I won an award from the *Columbia Journalism Review* and he went up with Mike Shriver instead. I've always wondered if things would've been different if I'd gone flying with him like I was supposed to.... Maybe the plane wouldn't have crashed. Maybe he'd still be alive."

"Who knows?" Derek shrugs. "Maybe you'd just be dead. How old were you then?"

"I'd just turned thirteen. It was the day after my birthday."

"Not a very good birthday present."

"No shit. It sucked."

"I just turned eleven last month."

"Hey, Happy Birthday!" I say, feeling like a dirtbag for not remembering. Then again, I wasn't even sure I *had* a little brother until a few weeks ago. "We should go celebrate after your allergy shot."

"It's no big deal," says Derek. "Mom didn't even get me anything."

"She was never very good about remembering birthdays," I tell him. "She forgot a lot of mine, too."

"Do you think she forgets on purpose?"

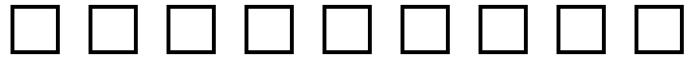
That question stabs me right in the heart. *The poor little guy!* It's bad enough that he has a mother who forgets his birthday (I flash on my favorite yard foreman back when I worked at the lumberyard - the self-proclaimed World's Strongest Okie, Johnny Hoss - who once said of my mother: "That bitch'd eat her own young if she had half the chance..."). But worse than that - much worse - blameless little Derek has a brother who forgot him for SEVEN YEARS.

Did I do it on purpose? God, I hope not....

"Mom had a rough childhood," I say, somewhat lamely, with a lump rising in my throat. "Her parents weren't very nice to her, so now she has a hard time being nice to her own kids. It doesn't come naturally to her."

I don't want the same thing to ever be said of me. I make a silent vow that I'll always try to be there for Derek - and for anyone else who might need me in the future.

Forgetting is no longer an option.



“Here’s the thing about Mom... her dad made her eat her pet rabbit.”

I’ve decided to tell Derek the story about our maternal grandfather after all. We’re sitting at a picnic bench in back of The Red Rooster with chorizo sandwiches, onion rings, and root beer floats – and the moment just seems right. A train loaded with Santa Fe boxcars is passing by on the railroad tracks in the distance, its mournful whistle blow dopplering toward us across the hot, dusty grape vineyards. Classic Kingsburg. It has me in a storytelling mood.

“A rabbit’s not so bad,” Derek says philosophically. “At least she didn’t have to barbecue her basset hound.”

“Mom didn’t make you eat Sam, did she?” I ask – Sam being short for Samantha, our narcoleptic pet basset hound who was still alive, so far as I knew, at the time I went over the cliff in Big Sur.

“Sam just died of old age, as far as I could tell,” Derek answers. “She got into the garden one day and ate a bad zucchini. After that, it was pretty much Game Over.”

“Here’s to Sam,” I say, raising my root beer float. “She was a good dog. I wanted to marry her when I was six years old, even though I knew she wouldn’t be able to wear white at the wedding because she’d been humped by Raymundo – Rina Rowley’s big brown Doberman across the street.”

“*Raymundo!*” Derek rolls the ‘R’ like a histrionic flamenco guitarist. “Whatever happened to Raymundo? Or Rina Rowley?” Again, with the rolled ‘R’s – a verbal flourish he must have picked up from his little Mexican pals (or that “Ruffles have Ridges” commercial...).

"Believe it or not, Rina Rowley is a movie star now," I inform my little brother. "And my old roommate James is dating her. They're buying a house together somewhere down in Hollywood. That's why he moved out. As for Rina's dog, when I was seven years old I was climbing around on Grandma Helen's back fence and I thought I saw Raymundo getting levitated by a bunch of adults in Doctor Smiley's yard next door."

"Levitated? Like floating in the air?"

I nod my head. "Then I heard something break inside him and I think he died. After that, I never saw Raymundo again." I know it sounds crazy, but I'm just narrating what I saw (*the adults standing in a circle, unmoving, as the Doberman lifts off the ground, no one touching it, its legs thrashing the air, its cries like a small person screaming, then a dull snap - like a piece of wood breaking under a mattress - and the dog goes limp, dropping to the ground with a thud...*).

"Who were the adults?" Derek asks me.

"I couldn't see their faces through the trees. I thought I recognized Doctor Smiley's bow tie and Mom's red sandals, but now I'm not so sure. After being forced to eat her pet rabbit, I don't think Mom would've willingly sacrificed a dog."

"Stan told me he found a skinned dog once. It was in Grandma Helen's garbage can a long time ago. All the fur had been sliced off from its neck down, but there wasn't any blood. They left the head alone. I think he told me it was a brown Doberman."

"That sounds like Raymundo. Grandma told me she saw it, too."

"You've seen some pretty weird stuff," Derek tells me, as if I don't know that already. "Didn't you go around telling everybody you got your butt kicked by the Easter Bunny? Mom was always bringing that up, like it proved you were insane somehow."

"I wrote a newspaper article about that a while back," I admit. "When I was six, I thought I saw the Easter Bunny on Easter morning. And it beat the crap out of me. Put me in the hospital. But I'm willing to consider the possibility that it might've been a screen memory for something else."

"What's a screen memory?"

"A made-up memory that takes the place of a real memory, usually because the real memory is so traumatic that your mind can't handle it. In my newspaper article, I said the Easter Bunny might've been a screen memory for being abducted by aliens, but I was only joking about that. What I really think - sitting here, right now - is that it was a sort of hallucinated metaphor, or screen memory, for what Mom's uncontrolled rage was doing to me as a kid."

"Like how?"

"Well, think about it: Mom's parents forced her to eat her pet rabbit and she didn't stand up to them - probably because her father was a holier-than-thou minister and nobody *ever* stood up to him. When super-strict parents make a kid knuckle under like that, it creates a black hole of rage and self-loathing. Everything good about the kid gets sucked into it. And then, when that kid grows up and becomes a young mother, barely out of her teens, like Mom did...."

"Then look out!"

“Exactly. Look the hell out, because she’ll be laying the same heavy trip on you that got laid on her. She probably won’t make you eat your own pets, but she’s going to make damn sure you’re miserable, just like she was. She can’t help it. You’ll never be able to trust her and you’ll never know what to expect. She’ll want total emotional control over you because she has no emotional control over herself. And if you’re brave enough – or foolish enough – to point out her psycho behavior to her, she’ll just despise you even more.”

“That sounds like Mom all right,” Derek says. “One minute she’s fine, and the next thing I know she’s lost her shit and she’s yelling at me like she hates my guts.”

“Right, I remember...” I say, sympathizing. “Sometimes, when I was a kid, I could almost see that black hole in Mom and feel myself getting sucked into it. Subconsciously, I must have connected her psychotic rage to that day when she ate her pet bunny. And I knew that our grandfather, that hypocrite Methodist minister, had forced her to do it. So, for me, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ the Son, the braising of Blackie the bunny, and the death of Mom’s soul all got rolled up into one big, ugly metaphor....”

“An ass-kicking Easter Bunny. Which is really just a screen memory for a rabbit-eating mom who wants to crucify her sons.”

“Y’know, you’re pretty smart for an eleven-year-old,” I tell Derek. “Do you read a lot?”

“I read all the time,” he says. “I’ve read almost all your old books: Jung, Hesse, Keats, Rilke... am I pronouncing those right?”

“Close enough. I think books are what saved me from completely going under when I realized I didn’t have a mom I could depend on. They’re probably doing the same for you.”

“I hope so,” says Derek, “but I think having a brother helps, too.”



After our greasy but delicious lunch at The Red Rooster, we head to Fresno. I’m unfamiliar with the address that my mother wrote down, but Derek has no trouble directing me right to it. It’s in a treeless office park just a few blocks south of Blackstone Avenue – an odd place for an allergist to do business, but at least it’s not Doctor Smiley’s pediatric clinic. In the back of my mind I was worried that Derek was being subjected to the same abuses I’d experienced.

We lock up the Pathfinder and Derek leads me around the corner to a garishly painted door displaying a likeness of Winnie-the-Pooh chasing a yellow balloon with a seventies-era smiley face stenciled on it. I get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach as we pass through it. My worst suspicions are confirmed when the chirpy receptionist at the front desk asks us: “Are you here to see Doctor Smiley today?”

Doctor Smiley has a new clinic! Holy fucking hell!

“You didn’t tell me you were seeing Doctor Smiley today,” I say to Derek.

“I thought you knew. He’s your old doctor, right?”

“We need to talk....”

“Sign in first, please,” says the receptionist, handing us a clipboard.

Derek signs his name and we head to the waiting room. Beat-up wooden toys and gummy-looking building blocks are strewn everywhere. Several issues of *Highlights* magazine are fanned out on a child-sized table surrounded by little yellow chairs. Kids are running around loose while frazzled-looking mothers try to keep them in line with an occasional outburst of sharp words or threatening hand gestures.

I lead Derek over to a corner dominated by a fake plastic palm tree where we can sit down in a pair of orange-pleather chairs and talk in semi-privacy. "Has Doctor Smiley ever taken you down to his basement?" I ask him.

"I didn't even know he *had* a basement," says Derek.

"Has he ever done anything weird to you?"

"Aside from stabbing me with allergy shots and looking up my nose with a flashlight? No."

Did I just imagine Doctor Smiley's basement full of horrors?

I try a different tack: "How do you like him? As a doctor?"

"He's all right, I guess, but he's so fake-happy all the time that he kind of creeps me out. Why? Did he do something weird to you?"

"You could say that." I'm trying to answer honestly. "But it was such a long time ago that I'm not sure if I'm remembering it correctly."

"You could try asking him."

"I'm not sure he'd tell me the truth," I say, "but that gives me an idea."

What did Lloyd say to me exactly? Something like, "The truth is to be found in your medical records in Doctor

Smiley's basement...."

Before we leave the clinic today, I'm going to find a way to steal my medical records from that jolly asshole, Doctor Smiley.



A nurse in a pale green polyester lab coat enters the waiting room and calls Derek's name. We get up and follow her down a long, sterile-looking corridor lined with blond wood laminate doors. Every door has a smiley face sticker on it, about four inches in diameter, and below each smiley face is a room number. The nurse puts us in Room 11 and says Doctor Smiley will be seeing us in a few moments.

This new examination room is just like the old ones in Doctor Smiley's previous pediatric clinic: simpering yellow smiley faces dotting the wallpaper, smiley face magnets clinging to the metal cabinets, and smiley face stickers stuck on every available drawer and chair. Even the wooden tongue depressors are laminated with little smiley faces saying, "Have a nice day." Derek sits down on top of a paper-sheeted examining table and idly pumps up a smiley face embroidered blood pressure cuff hanging on the wall.

"I guess he still likes his smiley faces," I observe.

"No shit, Sherlock," Derek replies. He looks morose.

"Y'know, I had allergy shots for almost ten years, and I swear all they did was make me feel sicker," I tell him.

In fact, my allergic reactions to some of Doctor Smiley's experimental potions had been so severe that they'd nearly killed me. Itchy red rashes broke out on my neck, chest, and arms. Then my tongue and throat started swelling up,

making it difficult to breathe. It was like an asthma attack, only worse, because my usual rescue inhaler couldn't reverse its course. The only thing that worked was a shot from an EpiPen – a syringe loaded with adrenaline. If I didn't get one within twenty minutes, I would go into anaphylactic shock as the allergic reaction cascaded into a self-sustaining feedback loop that ended in heart failure or lung collapse.

Doctor Smiley frog-marched me right up to that twenty-minute death-window more times than I could count. He also made me participate in studies for new medicines to bolster the allergy shots, which had a lot of fun side effects (*shingles, hives, teeth-chattering chills, projectile vomiting, jaundice, bubbling green diarrhea, and a kind of hallucinatory lassitude that resembled rapture of the deep...*).

Despite the jolly doctor's obvious incompetence, my mother never lost faith in him. The two of them seemed like gleeful co-conspirators in a plot to cause my early demise.

"I don't think the allergy shots are doing much for me, either," Derek says. "Stan's hopper juice helps, though. I can feel the difference when I don't drink it."

"Poison into medicine..." I say as a plan begins to formulate in my mind. "I wonder if they've got any drugs stashed in here." I open the examination room's metal cabinets and take a look inside.

Eureka! There's a yellow cardboard box full of EpiPens on the top shelf. I take a handful and stuff them in the back pocket of my jeans. They might come in handy for the larcenous activity I'm planning.

Derek asks me what I'm doing. I'm about to tell him when we hear a knock on the other side of the door. Quickly, quietly, I close the cabinet and turn so my back is against the wall.

"Derek!" booms Doctor Smiley in that all-too-familiar bombastic voice of his. He steps into the examination room looking lively, trailing his usual noxious mist of drugstore cologne. "And who's this? *Oh-ho!* Is this Gordon! *Holy-moly!* What a surprise!"

He extends his pudgy hand. Without thinking, I reach out to shake it. His grip is dry and firm, but as we let go he tickles my wrist in a queer way.

"Back from the dead, I see!"

"Something like that..." I tell him. He's aged quite a bit since I last saw him. His toad-like neck bulges out even more grotesquely above his ever-present red bow tie, his jowls are hanging lower and looking flabbier, and he's balder and grayer. There's also a huge red boil swelling on his forehead where a unicorn's horn might be. But other than that, he's the same fat-assed motormouth as always.

"How's your health?" Doctor Smiley asks me as he puts on the fey little tortoiseshell half-frame reading glasses that dangle from a chain around his neck. He squints at me through the lenses.

"I'm fine. I'm just here today because Derek needed a ride."

Turning to Derek, Doctor Smiley booms out, "How's it feel to have your big brother back among the living?"

"Pretty great..." Derek answers with a roll of his eyes. "I always knew he was alive."

"Your mother sure didn't. It must have come as quite a shock!"

"Yeah, she freaked out big-time."

"I guess I should've called first." I shrug.

"Derek, would you mind if your brother and I have a private little chat?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

"We won't be long. We'll just be down the hall in my office." Looking my way, he says, "Gordon? Is that all right with you?"

It's just what I was hoping for....

"Let's do it," I say.



"Does it seem hot in here, or is it just me?" Doctor Smiley asks, tugging on his collar where the bow tie pinches his bloated neck.

"It's just you," I tell him, although that's not entirely true.

We're seated on opposite sides of an ornate, antique walnut desk that looks like it might have been picked up at a Sotheby's auction for a six-figure sum. The wall to Doctor Smiley's right is a solid wall of books, shelved in a way that's pleasing to the eye. The usual college diplomas, medical licenses, and certificates of achievement are tastefully framed on the walnut paneled walls behind him and to his left. The room looks as if a movie set decorator with an unlimited budget had been tasked with creating a private office for a celebrated Manhattan heart surgeon. It

seems a tad ostentatious for a quack pediatrician in a Fresno office park.

“Does Arnie Andersen know you’re in town?” Doctor Smiley asks me, as if that’s somehow relevant.

“Why should I check in with Arnie Andersen?” I ask, genuinely puzzled. Arnie was my father’s business partner, along with my Uncle Gerald. They owned lumberyards and jointly shared the profits in some complicated arrangement that I never really understood. Lloyd had once shown me a framed photograph in which he and Arnie were rubbing shoulders with a sallow-looking George Herbert Walker Bush in his pre-President, Director of Central Intelligence days. All three of them were supposedly thirty-third degree Scottish Rite Freemasons (Arnie also belonged to my father’s favorite fraternal organization, the Hoo-Hoo Club). Beyond that, the only thing that really stands out in my mind about Arnie was that he played bagpipes at my father’s funeral.

“Arnie and your mother have become very close since you left...” Doctor Smiley informs me, “much to your Uncle Gerald’s chagrin.”

“So she’s not visiting nudist colonies with my uncle anymore?”

“From what she tells me, she’s dating Arnie exclusively.”

It galls me that my loathed childhood pediatrician is so intimately familiar with my aging mother’s sex life – which had once entailed getting plowed by her dead husband’s younger brother, Gerald, an ardent nudist. After my father died, my mother inherited a controlling interest in Arnie’s lumberyard in Modesto and Swannson Lumber, Inc. in Kingsburg. So both Arnie and my uncle have a financial

interest in keeping my mother on their side. Being men, I guess they decided the best way to do that would be by wooing and screwing her.

That line of thinking jogs another memory, something I'd completely forgotten until just this moment. Right before the car crash in Big Sur, Lloyd had said to me: *"...if you knew how your father, in a sense, traded a piece of your soul to Arnie Andersen in exchange for a cut of Arnie's business, well... let's just say it made me see red, when I found out what Project MONARCH had done to you and Jimmy."*

Immediately following that revelation, I'd experienced the bout of narcolepsy that had caused Lloyd to steer his Bentley into a guardrail.

"Arnie can go screw himself," I say, redoubling my concentration on the task at hand. Patchy red welts are breaking out on Doctor Smiley's neck. Mine, too - but at least I know what's causing them.

"Okay. So let's leave Arnie out of this. But tell me, Gordon... I'm really curious to know where you've been hiding yourself for the past seven years. We all thought you were dead."

"What I want to know is if this new place has a basement."

Doctor Smiley's bulbous eyes boggle. "A basement? Why?"

"I have some fond memories of the basement in your last place."

I watch as a single bead of perspiration drips down the side of Doctor Smiley's left temple. He's going to try bluffing - I can tell before he even opens his mouth.

"We didn't have a basement. You must be thinking of someplace else," he says.

"No, it was definitely your basement, in your pediatric clinic. And I'll bet you have one here, too." That lying bastard should be feeling his throat closing up right about now. I know mine is.

Doctor Smiley hunches his shoulders up around his ears and clutches at his chest. A low, painful-sounding wheeze emanates from his frog-lipped mouth. He looks around the room in a panic as he begins to understand what's happening to him.

"You remember teaching me about remote influencing, don't you?" I ask. "If I can recall and induce physical symptoms in myself, I can psychically project them onto someone else."

"That's THETA programming. You don't have access," Doctor Smiley labors to tell me.

"I had an experience in Brussels that gave me an all-access pass," I say, not bothering to go into the smutty details. "So whose heart do you think stands a better chance of surviving a severe allergic reaction that leads to anaphylactic shock? Yours - pumping sixty years worth of lard through your arteries? Or mine - still young and strong, with lots of fucked-up rehearsals for this moment?"

"You'll die with me," Doctor Smiley mutters as his lips shade toward a cyanotic blue. "Instant karma, remember?"

I take the EpiPens out of my back pocket and show them to him. "I figure we have about ten minutes before the allergic reaction cascades out of control. Where's the basement?"

He glances at the bookcase.

“What is it with all the trick bookcases these days?” I ask, flashing on Skeeze’s trick bookcase with its hidden dumbwaiter shaft, revealed by a tug on *Gravity’s Rainbow*. I stand up too quickly and a tingling wave of dizziness almost forces me to sit back down. “Okay... so which book opens it?”

Doctor Smiley just shakes his head, trying to suck air.

“I’m willing to hang out until one of us keels over. Any bets on who goes first?”

“It’s Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*.”

I find the book and pull on its spine. The bookcase swings open on a concealed hinge, revealing a spiral staircase dropping away into darkness.

“Okay, you go first,” I say. “And turn on the lights on your way down.”

“I don’t think I can walk.”

“Well, you better try, or you’ll end up croaking behind that fancy desk of yours. Once we get down there and I find what I need, I’ll give you a shot.”

“Better make it two,” Doctor Smiley says as he rises to his feet and shuffles toward the open bookcase. He flicks on a hidden light switch that illuminates the stairway and the basement below.

“Watch the steps...” I say.

Despite my warning, Doctor Smiley stumbles about midway down the staircase and tumbles to the bottom. He lands facedown on the polished concrete floor, knocking himself out. From the look of it, he’s probably lost a few teeth and broken his nose. I step over his prone body and check his pulse. It’s weak and thready. I yank down his

Sansabelt slacks and stab an EpiPen into his flabby gluteus maximus. For good measure, I stick another one right through his shirt into his left shoulder, closer to his heart. I don't particularly care if he lives or dies, but I leave the EpiPens where I've stuck them. That way, if the police find his dead body later, they'll be able to determine that I was making a half-assed attempt to save him, rather than poison him. I'm assuming my presence in Doctor Smiley's clinic has been caught on video surveillance cameras.

I inject an EpiPen into my own arm and take a look around. What I see is a modern, antiseptic version of a medieval torture chamber - with a lot of high-tech dildos lying around. I wasn't imagining things. Doctor Smiley really is the mind-fucking pedophile that I remembered. If he weren't already unconscious, I'd be taking a moment to kick him in the balls.

Wow, that adrenaline comes on fast... I think to myself as a chemical wave of relief washes through my body. Suddenly, I can breathe again. I also feel sleepy, which is surprising, considering what adrenaline usually does to people, but drinking coffee used to relax me in the same soporific way.

My vision is so shimmery that I might be on the verge of hallucinating. Right after my first childhood encounter with an EpiPen, as I recall, I hallucinated a semi-transparent basset hound that tiptoed on its hind legs over to the couch where I was resting and lovingly pasted airmail stamps on my forehead.

My whole plan now is to find my medical records as quickly as possible, go grab Derek, and then drive someplace where I can park and take a nap. If Doctor Smiley's minions try to stop me, I'll fight them off with one

of the extra-large dildos laid out on the table over there like a size queen's surgical instruments.

En garde!

I pick up a veiny purple silicone dildo about twenty-four inches long and six inches in diameter, wondering how anyone could even fit such a monstrosity into his or her anus or vagina. Maybe it serves some other function. It could be a gigantic rubber bait worm for great white shark fishing, I suppose. Curious, I flip a toggle switch hidden inside the purple silicone nutsack. The mammoth dildo starts vibrating like a paint shaker in a hardware store. It wrenches free of my hands and lands buzzing on the concrete floor like an extremely pissed off electric eel. I watch as it starts snaking its way toward Doctor Smiley, still facedown with his bare rump shining at the dildo like a homing beacon. I'm inclined to let whatever happens happen.

Over beneath a huge one-way mirror to my right, next to the spin chamber, there's a set of three-foot-tall industrial metal filing cabinets. I go over and try the drawers. They're all locked. Fortunately, Doctor Smiley happens to have a set of keys in the front pocket of his tacky polyester slacks. After a few failed attempts, I find the right key to unlock them.

The drawer I've opened contains files arranged in alphabetical order, going by patients' last names. At the front, I see a folder labeled *LaRue, Lorraine*, and toward the very back it ends with *Puckett, Geoffrey*. I look for *Marrsden, James* among the M files, but I don't find anything. So I close that drawer and open the one below it. Q through T....

There I am: *Swannson, Gordon*. I lift out the whole file. It contains about two solid inches of paperwork. There's no similar file for Derek, thank god. Just as I'm about to close the drawer, my eye catches another name that I recognize:

Rowley, Rina.

I lift out that file, too. It's even thicker than mine.

I decide to take it with me. It should contain some interesting reading material – potential fodder for a new TV series: “Medical Files of the Rich and Famous” hosted by Robin Leach. Besides, I'm pretty sure that James would want me to tell him if his celebrity girlfriend happens to be a mind-controlled assassin.

DARKNESS AT LLOYD'S

After parking in the shade of a cherry orchard down a two-track dirt road just outside of Fowler, I sit up with Derek in the front of my rented Nissan Pathfinder and try to make sense of the medical records I've stolen. The tan accordion folder in my lap is bound with a ring of dark blue paper ribbon, like something you might find on a toilet seat lid in a roadside motel with decent maid service. A warning sticker pasted on the front holds the ribbon in place:

WARNING: Documents in this file are classified TOP SECRET INDIGO BOOJUM. Personnel without Project MONARCH / INDIGO BOOJUM clearance should read no further and report to their unit security officer for debriefing. Failure to comply with this warning is an imprisonable offense under the Espionage Act (18 U.S.C. § 794 et seq.).

Project MONARCH. There it is... confirmation, at last. Lloyd was right about it all along.

As for the warning: Fuck that. They're *my* records. I tear through the ribbon and start reading. What I find is a collection of arcane medical forms filled out with abbreviated words, cryptic notations, and a smattering of graphs and timeline charts. Nothing immediately leaps out at me. Doctor Smiley's handwriting is atrocious.

“What’s an Indigo Boojum?” Derek asks, looking at the front of Rina’s unopened folder.

“I’m not sure. *Boojum*, I know, is a made-up word from a poem called ‘The Hunting of the Snark’ by Lewis Carroll – the guy who wrote *Alice in Wonderland*,” I tell Derek. “I don’t know if there’s a connection, but when Dad joined the Hoo-Hoo Club he told me that all the officers were named after creatures in that poem. Like, their big Hoo-Hoo-in-Chief was called the Snark of the Universe.”

“Weird...” says Derek.

“Yeah,” I agree. “And *Indigo* is just a dark shade of blue... although I once heard a trance channeler at Esalen named Lee Carroll say there was a new generation of kids growing up with psychic powers, which he called *Indigo Children*.”

“You think he’s in on this?”

“I have no way of knowing... but things are definitely getting curiouuser and curiouuser.” I point to Rina’s tan accordion folder. “Why don’t you open that up? Let’s see what’s in there.”

I wonder if I should be leading Derek down this particular rabbit hole. Would the U.S. government go so far as to prosecute a minor under the Espionage Act? I doubt it – although with George Bush in office, I suppose anything’s possible.

Before I finish that thought, Derek rips through the paper ribbon. “Rina Rowley... she’s the movie star you were telling me about earlier, right? The one whose dog got whacked in Doctor Smiley’s backyard.”

“Right,” I say. “My friend James is living with her, so I thought we should check her out for him – see if she has any diseases.”

“How come you didn’t get my records, too?”

“Your records weren’t in there, where I was looking.”

“So I’m not in the Secret Indigo Boojum Club? Damn!”

“That’s probably a *good* thing,” I tell my little brother.



The more time we spend with them, the spookier the medical records get. Although I’m having a hard time deciphering the handwriting and following all the clinical jargon, it soon becomes apparent that some seriously fucked up mind control programming had been forced upon us in Doctor Smiley’s basement. In my records, there are dated hypnosis sessions that coincide with times I remember being hospitalized for pneumonia or broken bones. Rina’s hypnosis sessions are even more extensive. The records make it clear that she’s gone operational, as I never did. (In a jittery scrawl of red ink on the last page of my file, I find the words: *SUBJECT TERMINATED - BIG SUR, 5-27-83*)

In Rina’s records, there are oblique references to drug running, high-class prostitution, bombings, and assassinations. Rina was running “ops” (a shorthand term I find written throughout) in places like Beirut, Sofia, Istanbul, Moneron Island, Moscow, and Grozny. She was sent to meet men with strange-sounding names like Abdullah Çath, Yves Guérin-Sérac, Stefano Delle Chiaie, Bandar bin Sultan, Semion Mogilevich, Vladislav Lukyanenko, Dzhokhar Dudayev, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Most recently, she’s been learning to fly CASA C-212 cargo planes out of Pinal Airpark, somewhere in the Arizona

desert. Her instructors are associated with USSOCOM (whatever that is...) and the CIA.

I only have vague ideas about what any of that means.

James' uncle would have some insights into this, I'm sure. His estate is located just behind the 9th hole at the Kings River Golf Course, about ten miles from where we're parked. I know Lloyd travels a lot, but if he's home, I doubt he'll mind very much if I just drop in on him to say hello. After all, he's done the same to me.

There are some good reasons to be paranoid about Lloyd and his medico-military-occult complex connections, but on some deep, intuitive level I still trust him. So I start the Pathfinder and tell Derek I'm going to introduce him to a fat old friend of mine.



Lloyd's estate looks like one of the old Great Camps built by the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts up in the Adirondacks back when robber baron families still thought nature was worth visiting. It's constructed of rough-hewn log beams, weathered cedar shingles, and a grand, river rock portico that Derek and I approach with a certain amount of trepidation. It's hard to feel comfortable around extreme wealth unless you were born into it.

The carved mahogany *art-nouveau* front door opens before I even get a chance to knock on it. There stands Lloyd, in all his plump and stately glory.

"Gordon! What a pleasant surprise!" he says, beaming.

"Hey, Lloyd," I say, smiling right back at him. He's wearing a sky blue seersucker suit with a psychedelic lime-and-hot-

pink paisley pocket square with a matching silk necktie. It's not a good look for him. He's showing enough seersucker to make a mainsail for a racing sloop.

"And this must be your brother, Derek!" Lloyd shakes Derek's hand and then mine.

I don't want to start off on a sour note, but I can't help myself: "If you knew I had a brother," I complain, "why didn't you tell me?"

"I assumed you knew!" Lloyd says with bluff good cheer. "Who forgets their own brother? Right, Derek?"

"Right!" says Derek, giving me a snarky look.

"Well, come on inside...." Lloyd shepherds us through his river rock foyer, past a large painting by Anselm Kiefer, and then we descend a few steps into his spacious living room with its open beam ceilings, draping ferns and exotic orchids, freaky wooden Noh masks, antique Stickley furniture, and richly patterned Persian carpets.

A Brian Eno track is playing on the state-of-the-art stereo system. I recognize it as "An Ending (Ascent)" from the *Apollo: Atmospheres and Soundtracks* album. Appropriate music, I suppose, for guy who sells rocket insurance.

"So what brings you to Kingsburg?" Lloyd inquires, eyeing the twin accordion folders I'm carrying. "No, wait... let me guess. You've paid a visit to Doctor Smiley, haven't you?"

"How'd you know?" Derek asks him.

"Here: have a seat." Lloyd points to a pair of beautiful old Stickley couches with padded leather cushions. "I once told your brother that the key to his past was in his medical records. I knew he wouldn't be able to resist retrieving them someday."

"So you set me up," I say.

"I prefer to think of it as providing you with crucial motivation. Can I get you something to drink?"

"I could use a beer."

"Me, too!" Derek chimes in.

"I don't think so..." I say to Derek. "If I take you home with beer on your breath, Mom'll never let me see you again."

"Then perhaps you shouldn't imbibe either," Lloyd suggests. "Let's make it Perrier, shall we?"

He lumbers over to his marble-tiled butler's pantry and returns with a stack of three crystal tumblers and two chilled green bottles of mineral water. I notice that Lloyd is sweating despite the air-conditioned chill in the room. He looks like a melting hippo. As he pours for each of us, he says: "I wish I could have seen the look on Smiley's face when you turned up. How did that predatory old jackass react when you told him you'd be liberating your medical records?"

"He was his usual fake-jolly self until he started to have a little trouble breathing," I say, not wanting to go into the details in front of Derek.

Lloyd picks up on my reluctance and moves the conversation along. "Were you able to make sense of his notes?"

"Actually, that's why we're here. I'm having a hard time figuring out what it all means. I'm glad we caught you at home."

"Fortuitously - for you, not for me - I'm here to spend some time with my dentist. I have an abscessed tooth that's

causing me considerable pain. I'm scheduled for a root canal tomorrow."

"Bummer," I say.

"Yes, it's amazing how something as simple as a toothache can lead to despairing, unproductive thinking," says Lloyd, resting his considerable bulk on the couch opposite us while rubbing his tender jaw. "It's yet one more indicator, among many, that we live in a fallen world. Who but a hostile, pain-sucking demiurge would create a world in which dental problems are so rampant?"

"I've always had pretty good luck with my own teeth," I tell him. "Probably because I don't like candy."

"Then maybe you can be of some assistance to me," Lloyd says, leaning over to place a massive hand on my knee. "I have a theory that remote influencing can be used to relieve discomfort, as well as cause it. After all, it seems to have worked that way for Edgar Cayce and more than a few shamans and the occasional *Voudon* priest."

"Who's Edgar Cayce?" Derek asks us.

"I'll tell you later," I promise him.

"Focus on the youthful good health of your lower left jaw," Lloyd suggests, "and then try to share it with me."

"Seriously?" I'm skeptical of my own healing abilities, but then it occurs to me that relieving the pain in a fat man's jaw isn't all that different from providing a sexually frisky young woman with an orgasm at a distance. It's just a matter of psychically sharing pleasurable feelings, right? So I concentrate and give it a shot.

After a few moments, Lloyd leans back on the couch with a goofy smile spreading across his flabby face. "God bless you, son," he sighs with a look of relief that appears almost

post-coital in its intensity. "You could have quite a career as a faith-healing evangelist, with talents like that. Just bray a bit about Jesus - like the Swaggarts and Falwells of this world - and you, too, could have little old ladies swooning at your feet and signing over their social security checks to you every month."

"I think I'll pass," I say. I have no idea if I've actually caused a physiological change in Lloyd's jaw. He could just be highly suggestible - feeling better due to a psychic placebo effect.

"What just happened?" Derek asks me.

"Nothing. Lloyd's just relaxing and enjoying the suckiness of his seersucker suit."

"Ha! Your impudent brother's only joking," says Lloyd, "but I *do* feel extremely relaxed - the best I've felt in years. Thank you, Gordon. I mean that sincerely. And now let's see if I can return the favor. Hand over those files and I'll try to help you decode them."

Lloyd's squinty eyes go wide (or as wide as they can go, which isn't saying much) when he sees Rina Rowley's name on the tab of the second folder. "That scheming shitbird had a file on my nephew's girlfriend?" Lloyd asks me. He's noticeably less relaxed now. "It was my understanding that Smiley only went after boys!"

"I guess he's an equal opportunity mind fucker," I say.

"God damn him to hell!" Lloyd fumes. "I actually *like* that girl. I had lunch with Rina and James in Los Angeles only a few weeks ago. She has a lot of spunk."

"Yeah... James has been bragging about all the spunk he's putting into Rina," I say. "He's heavily invested."

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

“Still... facts are facts.”

“What’s spunk?” Derek asks. “Is it what I think it is?”

“It probably is,” I tell him. “I’ll explain it to you later.”

“Your brother has a streak of crassness in him that makes him unwelcome in polite *société*,” Lloyd explains to Derek. “However, I’m of the opinion that polite society is nothing but a collection of rich know-nothings and their ego-crazed exploiters. Polite society can plant a big, wet kiss on my festering bunghole.”

“Well said,” I compliment him, “although I hope your bunghole isn’t really festering.”

“Actually, it’s clean as a whistle.” As if to demonstrate, Lloyd unleashes a fusillade of flatulence at a high, peeping pitch.

Derek used to be terrified of his own farts when he was a toddler, but no more. Now he almost falls over laughing. You can always count on an eleven-year-old to appreciate humor involving bodily functions.

“Jesus, Lloyd...” I say, nearly suffocated by his villainous fumes, “do you do that in front of Warren Buffet?”

“Fat old men are gassy. Deal with it. But at least I’m ‘farting through silk,’ as they say in the parlance of our times. I can’t speak for Warren... for all I know, that stingy rotten bastard is still wearing tattered old Jockey shorts that he got in bulk when he foreclosed on the Omaha Town Shelter for Wayward Boys.”

“Warren Buffet, the singer?” Derek asks, confused.

“That’s Jimmy Buffet,” I correct him. “Warren Buffet owns an insurance company, like Lloyd.”

"His is bigger than mine," Lloyd admits in a maudlin tone, staring down at his crotch. "He's much better at investing his float - although I can't see how he does it without violating insider-trading rules. He simply can't be better than everyone else at reading earnings reports. Maybe I'm just jealous, but I think the CIA or the Federal Reserve helps him out in exchange for bagman duties that go far above and beyond even mine."

"It's not like you're poor," I point out. Something's off about Lloyd today, but I can't put my finger on what it is until he confesses:

"Before I embarrass myself further, I should probably admit to you that a few hours before your arrival I gave myself a shamanic enema of *iboga* - a powerful jungle hallucinogen."

"Oh great..." I say. "Does that mean you'll be seeing bloodthirsty Mexican Goat Weasels humping your piano, or *nagas* wriggling up your nostrils?"

"Nothing of the sort," sniffs Lloyd, "although if I should wake up tomorrow to find a viscous puddle of Mexican Goat Weasel ejaculate spoiling the finish on my Steinway, you'll be the first to know."

"You actually take drugs for fun?" Derek asks him.

"Part of the fun, apparently, is sticking weird drugs up his butt," I elucidate. This visit with Lloyd is proving to be a bit more educational for my little brother than I'd anticipated.

Lloyd responds with exaggerated dignity: "The shamanic enema is a time-honored technique that prevents vomiting. Some shamanic concoctions are almost too foul to drink - and they can have violent emetic properties, as the stains on my prized Ming vase will attest - but I wouldn't trade

even *those* experiences for the knowledge they've imparted to me. They taught me that there's more to this world than science has thus far been able to explain. And it's not to be feared."

"So now you're on a quest to become a fearless, butt-stuffing shaman," I say. "No wonder Warren Buffet's creaming you in the stock market."

Smiling with paternalistic tolerance, Lloyd says, "T.S. Eliot once wrote that '*Old men ought to be explorers.*' I may have said something like this to you before, but I'd qualify that statement as: 'Old men ought to be *psychic* explorers.' While I don't condone drug use for the very young – it can wreak havoc on developing minds – when you're older, like me, certain consciousness-exfoliating mushrooms, shrubs, and vines can facilitate access to states of non-ordinary reality... states from which a proper shaman can help those he cares about back in this world."

"I thought you just did it for fun," I say.

"I don't do it 'for fun' so much as I do it to expand my own perceptions. *What lies hidden should be revealed* – that's my core belief, even though the CIA-funded psychic, Ingo Swann, once jokingly said to me: 'It's unkind to point out the obvious to those who don't want to see it, but it's worse to point out the invisible to those convinced it doesn't exist.'"

"It sounds like the CIA was paying him to be a self-aggrandizing psychic snot," I say.

"Perhaps they were," muses Lloyd, "but I'm of the opinion that the great bulk of humanity has been conned and exploited by the invisible – but real – for far too long. It's time to drag those unseen exploiters out into the Light.

Covert fascism is best undermined not by direct assault – which is what evil expects and is prepared for – but rather, by ‘a sideways swipe through hyperspace,’ as my friend Terence McKenna has been known to say.”

“Huh...” says Derek, either totally confused, or contemplating what his life might be like if he dedicates it to taking sideways swipes at invisible fascists on behalf of the great bulk.

“Now let’s have a look at those files, shall we?”

Lloyd opens my file first and turns to a random page. “Oh, now here’s a tasty phrase...” he murmurs, almost to himself: “Subject G’s THETA alter has developed a *‘weaponized psyche.’* I can hazard a guess as to what that might mean. How about you?”

I say, “I’ll bet it means I can launch rocket-propelled grenades from my pituitary gland and fire tracer bullets from my hypothalamus.”

“You jest, but I’m sure Doctor Smiley wasn’t laughing when he tasted his own medicine today.”

“Yeah, about that... when I left him in his basement, I wasn’t sure if he’d be able to get back up again. Is there any way you could check and see if somebody found him?”

“Is it a matter of life or death?”

I shrug. “It might be,” I say. But Doctor Smiley’s fate is weighing on me far more than I’m letting on. I’m hoping I haven’t become an inadvertent murderer – even if that pervy pediatrician kind of deserved to be murdered.

“Let me go upstairs and make a few calls,” Lloyd says, rising slowly from the couch with a hand held to the base of his spine. “I’ll be right back.” He takes the files with him.

“So what’s spunk?” Derek asks me as soon as Lloyd has disappeared up the wooden flight of steps next to the foyer.

I hadn’t planned on delivering a Sex Ed lecture today, but now I’m feeling like I should at least make the attempt. I know Derek won’t be getting any helpful guidance in that direction from our mother. And some of what I learned in Brussels might be worth passing along.



“So there’s no shame in jerking off, but try not to leave the shower looking like a lemon meringue pie exploded in there. Mom really hates that,” I tell Derek. That’s my last bit of advice before Lloyd rejoins us in the living room. He’s been upstairs for quite some time.

“I have news,” Lloyd announces with a smirk. “Doctor Smiley lives! But to his great inconvenience, he was found unconscious in the basement by his newest staff member – a former candy striper named Shonelle, who’d been hired more for her winsome way with patients and her ‘high booty,’ rather than any sort of a reputation for maintaining a cool head during a crisis. When Shonelle chanced upon her incapacitated employer, she panicked. Instead of following protocol, she called for an ambulance. Judging by the disarray of dildos in the doctor’s immediate vicinity, the EMTs suspected foul play – or at least some fairly aggressive sadomasochistic sex games – and the police were duly summoned.”

I start to snicker with giddy relief, imagining the scene.

“I’m told the local detectives are having a field day,” Lloyd continues: “confiscating files and videotapes, taking photographs, gathering all the unseemly evidence

necessary to put Smiley and his demented cohorts away for 25-to-life. We'll see what sort of damage control Smiley's superiors can accomplish when the Feds swoop down on the scene, but by then it might already be too late. I've tipped off some local journalists. The San Joaquin Valley branch of Project MONARCH is likely to be shut down posthaste."

"Thanks, Lloyd..." I say. "That's great to know."

"My CIA contacts tell me Smiley's endeavors were never looked upon favorably, anyway, even though he produced some spectacular results - our lovely acquaintance, Rina Rowley, being Exhibit A. I had a chance to skim through her file while I was making my calls. That girl is leading a double life without even being aware of it. On the one hand, she's an actress of limited talent but considerable sex appeal; on the other, she's a perfectly lethal assassin. Doctor Smiley had the power to switch her back and forth with a combination of drugs and hypnotic commands. I gather the assassin is aware of the actress, but the actress has never known of the assassin. And the assassin is quite accomplished. She's been successful where some of NATO's most ruthless Gladio agents have failed."

"I don't want to sound stupid," I say, "but what's a Gladio agent?"

"I'm glad you asked!" says Lloyd. "*Gladio* is the Latin term for a short double-edged sword used by gladiators, but it recently became a buzzword in the Italian press when the prime minister, Giulio '*Belzebù*' Andreotti was forced to admit that a secret 'stay-behind' army has existed in Italy since the end of World War II - an anti-communist guerilla force founded and financed by the CIA and MI6, and now controlled by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. It

goes by the code name 'Gladio' in Italy, but similar covert armies have been established in other countries all across Western Europe. Each has its own code name and shady history: 'TD BDJ' in Germany, 'Sheepskin' in Greece, 'Projekt-26' in Switzerland, 'Aginter Press' in Portugal, 'SDRA8 and STC/Mob' in Belgium, 'Counter-Guerrilla' in Turkey, and so forth... but collectively, the entire network is known as Operation Gladio. And like so many morally-dubious CIA undertakings, Operation Gladio owes its existence to the scheming, fervid brain of Allen Dulles."

"That fucker..." I append.

"Who's Allen Dulles?" Derek asks.

Oh boy. Lloyd gives him the Reader's Digest Condensed version of Dulles' biography: amoral attorney for Wall Street banks and the more prominent robber baron families; spymaster in Switzerland for the OSS during World War II; friend of Carl Jung (who helped him negotiate the Nazi surrender in Italy during Operation Sunrise); instigator and facilitator of Operation Paperclip (*"Let's bring all the best Nazis back to the U.S. and put them to work!"*); Director of Central Intelligence during the so-called 'golden age' for CIA covert operations (toppling foreign governments wherever U.S. corporate interests saw fit); God-like overseer of Project ARTICHOKE, MKULTRA, Operation Mockingbird, and so on... and then summarily kicked to the curb by John F. Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, which - *perhaps* - inspired Dulles to come up with the plan to assassinate the President and later serve on the Warren Commission to cover it up.

"He sounds like a prick," Derek says.

"He was complicated," Lloyd equivocates. "I think, at heart, he saw himself as a good man steered by history into

making some very difficult choices that turned out badly for some people.”

“No, Derek’s right...” I say. “He was a power-tripping prick who only cared about himself and his rich friends. You’re not a good man until you start making good choices. Until then, you’re just an agent of chaos. And you know it.”

“Well, Dulles certainly seemed to abide by the words of that other Smiley – John le Carré’s Smiley – who said in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*: ‘...if we lavish our concern on every stray cat, we never get to the center of things.’ I’ll give you that.”

“Still a prick,” Derek says. “Plus, he killed Kennedy.”

“Point taken,” says Lloyd. “But what got me started on this? Oh, yes... I wanted to tell you how Allen Dulles came up with the original plan to install secret, anti-communist armies all across Europe in the aftermath of World War Two... and how those secret armies – or Gladio units – were transformed into a European terrorist network under the leadership of NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander, General Lyman Lemnitzer. It’s a story worth telling, because Gladio’s ‘Strategy of Tension’ will one day, inevitably, be applied here in America – and thousands of innocent people will likely die as a result.”

“If this has anything to do with Carl Jung and black triangles, I’m gonna be so pissed...” I say, worried that Lloyd is about to go off on some druggy tangent, addled by the *iboga* up his ass. “I’d rather talk about what’s in my medical records, if that’s all right with you.”

“This has *everything* to do with what’s in your medical records,” Lloyd assures me. “You and Rina were being groomed for what I call ‘Gladio B’ – false flag terror events

and assassinations that are intended to take place within our own borders.”

“Oh. Well, in that case... lay it on me, big man.”

“You sound skeptical, Gordon, but consider this: How was it that an American President could be assassinated under conspicuously suspicious circumstances, and yet the machinery of legal inquiry scarcely budged, much less meted out justice? And more to the point, as upwards of thirty similar assassination attempts were being made on the life of the French President, Charles de Gaulle – who said he knew exactly who was trying to kill him – why do you think that de Gaulle pulled the French armed forces out of NATO’s integrated military command in 1966 and ordered all non-French NATO troops out of his country?”

“Let me guess... NATO was trying to whack him?”

“You make it sound like I’m spewing paranoid conspiracy theories, but that’s exactly what happened. General Lemnitzer ordered the hit. He was taking out his aggression on de Gaulle because he’d been denied his chance to go after Fidel Castro.”

“What about the Bay of Pigs? He had his chance, and he blew it.”

“The Bay of Pigs was a CIA operation. Lemnitzer gave the nod to it when Kennedy asked his opinion of its chances for success, but he secretly must have known that it would fail. He *wanted* it to fail. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lemnitzer surely would have thought that a military man such as himself should be in charge of overthrowing foreign governments, rather than a civilian Director of Central Intelligence like Allen Dulles. Mosaddegh in Iran... Árbenz in Guatemala... those operations must have pissed off

Lemnitzer to no end. I imagine he felt highly gratified when, as a direct result of the Bay of Pigs bungling, Dulles was sacked - even though they were both old friends and equally rabid anti-communists. With Dulles out of the way, Lemnitzer was given all the authority he thought was his due, but then he proceeded to overplay his hand by coming up with Operation Northwoods."

"I haven't heard of that one before," I say.

"That's because it's still classified," Lloyd says, "but word of it has leaked out from the intelligence community and the documents are slated for public release sometime within the next decade. Operation Northwoods was perhaps the most morally reprehensible plan ever devised by our own government, up to that point. It called for a series of false-flag terrorist events that would have been blamed on Castro with phony evidence. The idea was to use that Strategy of Tension - or *strategia della tensione*, as the Italians call it - to generate public support for a full-scale invasion of Cuba."

"How was that supposed to work?" I ask.

Lloyd starts ticking off the Northwoods proposals on his fat fingers: "First, they wanted to blow up a U.S. ship and her crew in Guantánamo Bay as a sort of psychopathic homage to the sinking of the USS *Maine*, which had been used by the Hearst media empire to incite the Spanish-American War back in 1898....

"Then they wanted to hijack an American passenger plane out of Miami using a special forces team disguised as Cuban agents, with the idea that they would later switch out the hijacked plane below radar with a copycat drone, which would then crash into the ocean somewhere near Cuba, purportedly killing all passengers aboard (although no

mention was made as to how all those kidnapped passengers would be prevented from talking about their ordeal if they were, indeed, not intended to be sacrificed)....

“Alternatively, the Joint Chiefs suggested using prefabricated copies of Communist Cuban MiGs to shoot down a commercial airliner flying over Cuban airspace en route to Jamaica, Panama, or Venezuela - or to make an unprovoked attack on a U.S. Air Force jet flying over international waters....

“They also wanted to sink boatloads full of refugees fleeing Cuba, or blow them up using plastic explosives on the streets of Miami and even Washington, D.C. - again, with false Cuban agents assigned the blame.”

“Holy crap!” I say.

“*Profane* crap would be more accurate,” says Lloyd. “Any one of those proposals should have been considered treason - a betrayal of everything our democratic government is supposed to stand for. But Lemnitzer and the other Joint Chiefs apparently believed that the benefits gained by the state would far outweigh the injustices committed against a relatively small number of innocent people. You can’t lavish your concern on every stray cat, as George Smiley said, right?”

“What did Kennedy say when he found out about it?” Derek asks.

“We can only guess,” says Lloyd, “but I can tell you that three days after Kennedy was briefed on the proposal, he officially rejected it and said there would be no use of military force in Cuba. A few months after that, Kennedy denied Lemnitzer another term as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and sent him packing to France at the start of 1963,

where he became Supreme Allied Commander of NATO – inheriting command of the secret ‘stay-behind’ armies that his old friend and nemesis, Allen Dulles, had so cleverly devised.”

“Did Kennedy know about Gladio?” I ask.

“It’s hard to say... Dulles, by rights, should have briefed him about Operation Gladio’s inner workings when he was Director of Central Intelligence, but there’s not a shred of evidence I can find that conclusively proves that he did so. Some CIA secrets are meant to stay secrets, even from the President. As that other CIA Director, Richard Helms, once said, ‘Presidents come and go. The CIA lasts forever.’”

“So the CIA can set up a whole network of secret armies in Europe and not even tell the President about it? That sounds insane!”

“It *is* insane, from a constitutional perspective, but U.S. intelligence agencies have a long history of omitting crucial details from U.S. Presidents, beginning with Harry Truman. Remember Operation Paperclip? Truman specified that no members of the Nazi Party or their collaborators should be brought into our country after the war, but Dulles and Company decided to ignore that edict. They just scrubbed the records clean for numerous Nazis and fascists who might otherwise have been tried at Nuremberg, had they been caught. And that’s how America ended up with the likes of Hubertus Strughold and Wernher von Braun.... It was Dulles’ bright idea to recruit some of those same former Nazis and right-wing extremists for his ‘stay-behind’ armies and provide them with massive underground arms caches throughout Europe.”

“Did Truman ever find out about it?” Derek asks.

“Truman seemed to have wised up by 1961, when he released a public statement in which he said: ‘I never would have agreed to the formulation of the Central Intelligence Agency back in forty-seven, if I had known it would become the American Gestapo.’”

“That’s pretty harsh,” I say. “But did he say anything specifically about Gladio?”

“Not to my knowledge,” says Lloyd. “Gladio may have been another secret that was kept from him. Shortly after Operation Sunrise, I believe that Dulles, Lemnitzer, and Frank Wisner covertly worked together to organize Northern Italy’s original Gladio army, thus setting the pattern for all the Gladio units to follow. I’m fuzzy as to the exact dates, but I can tell you that by 1951 Dulles had made a pact with the Chief of MI6, Sir Stewart Menzies, to shelter Operation Gladio under the umbrella of the Clandestine Planning Committee at the Supreme Headquarters of NATO’s military forces – which at the time was located on the outskirts of Paris. And when Charles de Gaulle was told of that arrangement, he expressed his extreme displeasure.”

“So when Lemnitzer moved to Paris, he decided to take out de Gaulle with a French twist on Operation Northwoods,” I surmise.

“Something like that...” says Lloyd. “Around that same time, you can also see the ethos of Operation Northwoods at work in the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, which was used as an excuse by President Johnson to escalate the war against North Vietnam. After U.S. warships were allegedly attacked, twice, by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Tonkin Gulf, Johnson ordered retaliatory air strikes on August 4th, 1964. But we now know that the USS *Maddox*

fired the first shots to deliberately engage the enemy on August 2nd, which resulted in only a single machine gun bullet ding to the *Maddox's* hull. And the second alleged attack on August 4th never actually happened – it was just a lie created for LBJ's propaganda purposes."

"So I'm assuming General Lemnitzer's old cronies from the Joint Chiefs of Staff must have been in on that one."

"You assume correctly. By the way, here's an interesting little tidbit: the commander of U.S. naval forces in the Gulf of Tonkin at that time was Admiral George S. Morrison, who happens to be the father of Jim Morrison."

"The singer for The Doors?" asks Derek. Score one for my little brother. He's only eleven, but the kid knows his music.

"Yes," Lloyd confirms, "the singer who named his band after Aldous Huxley's little primer on taking mescaline, *The Doors of Perception*, and who did more than perhaps anyone aside from Carlos Castaneda to introduce American youth to shamanic culture."

"Jim Morrison's dad was the admiral who lied about the Gulf of Tonkin Incident? I had no idea..." I say.

Lloyd says, "You might have wondered where all that convincing Oedipal rage came from in his song, 'The End' – which so perfectly suited the final credits of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*."

I recite the pertinent lyrics: "'Father?' 'Yes, son?' 'I want to kill you. Mother... I want to –'"

As if on cue, Derek lets loose with a strangulated, Morrison-style yowl: "MMWAA-AH-AH-AH-AW-OWWW!"

"Well, there you have it," says Lloyd, without missing a beat: "an ethically-compromised admiral plays a pivotal role in escalating the war in Vietnam just as his son, a soon-to-

be-famous rock star, is trying to avoid the draft. Talk about your generational conflict.... It's easy for me to imagine Jim Morrison's shamanic work with The Doors as a series of sideways swipes through hyperspace directed at none other than dear old dad."

"That gives the song 'Shaman's Blues' a whole new meaning," I say. "He wasn't exactly singing 'Tiptoe Through the Tulips,' was he?"

"No, he wasn't," says Lloyd. "In my opinion, one creative rebel like Jim Morrison is worth any number of ethically-compromised admirals, but our world tends to destroy the rebels and reward the admirals."

"You don't think Jim Morrison was murdered, do you?"

"The consensus opinion seems to be that he died of an accidental heroin overdose in a Parisian bathtub. But someone easily could have slipped him a 'hot dose' - an intentional overdose of uncut heroin. This is just pure speculation, but let's say that someone in the Office of Naval Intelligence decided Jim Morrison was about to become a very public embarrassment to his father. The ONI has a long history of associating with shady underworld figures connected to the drug trade. For instance, they made a lasting alliance with Charles 'Lucky' Luciano - the most powerful Mafia don, ever - by agreeing to spring him from prison in exchange for his delivery of *Cosa Nostra's* invaluable aid during the Allied invasion of Sicily in 1943. And by the late-nineteen-forties, the CIA had teamed up with the Corsican criminal syndicates in Marseilles to gain control of the docks, turning that lovely French port into the narcotics capital of the world, thanks to Operation Gladio tapping into the vastly lucrative heroin smuggling trade coming out of the ancient golden triangle connecting

Turkey, Afghanistan, and Iraq. So there's no doubt in my mind that the ONI or the CIA could have arranged for Jim Morrison's death in Paris, had they any interest at all in doing so."

"So you're saying the CIA uses Gladio to control the heroin trade in Europe?" I'm not sure if I can believe that.

"It's not just me saying it... the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration has an elite unit that specializes in prosecuting international crime cartels. It's called the Central Tactical Unit, or Centac. The former chief of Centac, Dennis Dayle, has gone on record as saying that during his 30-year history with the DEA and its related agencies, the major targets of his investigations 'almost invariably turned out to be working for the CIA.'"

"No shit?"

"Do you really think they killed Jim Morrison?" Derek asks Lloyd.

"I honestly don't know," he admits, "but I *do* know that quite a few 'accidental' drug overdoses, car crashes, plane crashes, suicides, disappearances, heart attacks, and agonizing deaths from rare diseases have been politically-motivated murders in disguise. The proof is there to be found, in case after case: Gary Caradori, killed in a small plane crash last month as he was investigating the Franklin child prostitution scandal in Omaha; James Forrestal, the first U.S. Secretary of Defense, who supposedly fell from a sixteenth-floor window at the Bethesda Naval Hospital in 1949; Frank Olson, a biological warfare expert at Fort Detrick, the subject of another highly suspicious case of defenestration in 1953; Roberto Calvi, known in the Italian press as 'God's Banker' because of his financial dealings with the Vatican Bank, who was found hanging beneath

Blackfriar's Bridge in 1982 after getting a bit too chummy with the *frati neri* - or 'black friars' - of Licio Gelli's infamous Masonic lodge, Propaganda Due, which, of course, had deep ties to Gladio."

"There you go again..." I say. "This Gladio obsession of yours is making me feel tired."

"That's how the Italians felt about it, too," Lloyd replies. "They refer to the wave of terrorism in their country from the late-sixties to the early-eighties as '*Anni di piombo*' - the 'Years of Lead.' It began with the Piazza Fontana bombing in 1969, which killed sixteen people and wounded eighty. It reached a sorrowful climax with the kidnapping and assassination of the much-admired former prime minister, Aldo Moro, in 1978, followed by the Bologna train station massacre in 1980 that killed 85 people and wounded more than 200. Much happened in-between. There have been more bombings and assassinations in Italy than you might believe, having been raised in a relatively sedate country like our own. But we - meaning the CIA and Gladio - seem to be more than casually linked with much of that violence. The Italian Strategy of Tension theory posits that Gladio was deliberately cultivating an atmosphere of terror in order to promote conservative, reactionary social trends and to prevent Italy's popular International Communist Party from rising to power."

"So Gladio targets politicians, like Charles de Gaulle, and maybe shamanic Lizard Kings, like Jim Morrison. But they've also been murdering completely innocent people in staged terrorist attacks - just like General Lemnitzer wanted to do in Miami with Operation Northwoods," I say, starting to see the big picture. "How screwed up is that?"

“It’s about as screwed up as it gets,” Lloyd says. “Lemnitzer’s legacy has made the world a far more dangerous place. Similar strategic applications of terrorism have occurred in Belgium, Greece, and just about anywhere else you look in Europe. I’m convinced it’s only a matter of time before Gladio B comes home to roost in America, probably under the guise of Islamic terrorists. Although from what I’ve read in our friend Rina’s medical file, *she* might be just the person to kick things off.”

“Wait. What?”

Our conversation is interrupted by the sound of a Balinese gong – Lloyd’s doorbell. Lloyd sighs and gets up from the couch, taking a moment to smooth out the wrinkles in his seersucker slacks.

“You might enjoy watching this...” he says as he plods toward the foyer, “I’m about to deploy my own Strategy of Tension to settle an old score.”



Lloyd returns to the living room accompanied by a ruddy-faced old man with a bristly white brush-cut and big, flabby biceps stretching out the short sleeves of his crisp white polo shirt. A strong smell of shoe polish and stale tobacco smoke enters the room with him, like the old guy polishes boots for a living – although he’s projecting an aura of smug suburban satisfaction that’s askew with that hypothetical career path. Behind his green-tinted aviator sunglasses, he obviously thinks of himself as a world-beater – a Master of the Universe – or at least a Master of Kingsburg and its immediate environs. It takes me a moment to recognize

him, because it's been over ten years since I last saw him at my father's funeral, and he hasn't aged gracefully:

It's Arnie Andersen.

"Hey Arnie," Derek says from the couch. He's obviously more familiar with Arnie than I am.

"Hello, Derek... Gordon..." says Arnie, nodding his chin toward me, as if seeing me returned from the dead is the most natural thing in the world. "Both you boys look like you could use a good hair trimming. I'll spring for it if you wanna go into town for buzz cuts. How 'bout it? Huh?"

I shoot Derek a look meant to convey: *I can't believe this conceited old clown is actually boffing our mom.* Derek shrugs as if to reply: *Oh well, what can you do?*

"You'll soon find you're no longer in a position to 'spring' for anything," Lloyd tells Arnie with a slight undercurrent of menace to his voice.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Right about now, your errant brother-in-law, the firebug, is setting off a gasoline bomb in the paint section of Swannson Lumber."

"What the - ?"

"Oh great... there goes our inheritance," I joke.

"There's no cause for alarm, Gordon. It's after hours, so no one will be hurt. And your mother and uncle happen to be fully insured. The settlement will be far in excess of what the business is actually worth. I should know, since I sold them their policies."

"You might've forgotten, but you sold me one of those policies, too," says Arnie. "So I guess you just did me a big ol' favor, since I'm Swannson Lumber's part-owner."

“Well, the trouble there, Arnie, is that your brother-in-law will be testifying that you put him up to it – and arsonists, when they’re found guilty, tend to discover that their insurance policies are worthless. And you *will* be found guilty, even after you hand over the remainder of your assets to the attorneys fighting to keep you out of prison. Your wife’s brother, on the other hand, was quite willing to do a little prison time in exchange for not having to work for the rest of his life. I gather he wasn’t too keen on driving a forklift for you six days a week for a few cents above minimum wage.”

“No one else would’ve hired that crumbum! I was doing him a favor!”

“He’ll soon be repaying that favor to you. In court.”

“So the lumberyard’s on fire?” Derek asks, a bit slow on the uptake. “*Cool!*”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this to me, Marrsden, but I swear, I’ll fight it. I’ll tell the cops you were behind the whole thing.”

“You might recall that my brother, Stan, is Kingsburg’s Chief of Police.”

“Screw you! I know people in the CIA. You won’t get away with this!” Arnie rages.

“Yes, that’s another thing I meant to tell you...” Lloyd says to him. “You and your gang of half-wits in the Fresno chapter of Project MONARCH are finished.”

“What’d you say?”

“I said, ‘You’re finished.’ No more finder’s fees for pimping kids to pedophile pediatricians. Your lucrative CIA side career is over. *Finito*. Gordon saw to that this afternoon.”

“How?” The veins in Arnie’s ruddy, wattled neck look like they’re about ready to pop.

“Doctor Smiley tripped over a dildo in his basement,” I say, “and when he came to, he found himself surrounded by angry policemen.”

“You can read about it in tomorrow’s *Fresno Bee*,” says Lloyd. “Not to put too fine a point on it, Arnie, you’re fucked.”

“Jesus H. Christ!” Pointing at me while glaring at Lloyd, Arnie shouts, “*He* doesn’t know what he’s done, but *you* do! Why did you let this happen? We’re brothers of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. Servants of the *arcantum arcandrum!*”

“I’m not some facile servant in your Dark Brotherhood,” Lloyd says with pacific calm, settling his great bulk back down on the couch. “At least, not anymore. It’s as simple as that.”

“No one gets out of it that easy, Marrsden. Are you high?”

“Yes, Arnie, as a matter of fact, I am.”

“He’s got some powerful jungle drugs up his butt,” my little brother says with a gap-toothed grin, as if that explains everything.

And maybe it does....

OBE-911: CHASING GNOSIS

To incarnate on Earth is to submit yourself to mind-fuckery on a truly global scale. There will be times when you feel like you're going insane, but it's your upside down, unstable world that's insane - along with the unbridled sociopaths who run it - not you. Life on Earth is like living in a madhouse and being told that everything you find there is perfectly normal. Wars, genocidal slaughter, synthetic terrorism, power mad politicians, corrupt judges, priests turned pedophile rapists, hatred and bigotry posing as God-sanctioned righteousness... all perfectly normal. Happens all the time. History is full of it. But we're here to tell you that it's not normal. Other parts of the multiverse aren't like that. You'll find that out - like we did - once you get to the Other Side.

Don't be in a rush to ditch your body, however. Don't do anything rash, like hop into the polar bear pit at the Central Park Zoo to put a swift, bloody end to your compromised existence. There's a very good reason for your present incarnation. There's also love and truth and beauty to be found in every human lifespan. We just happen to think there's way too much evil, suffering, and injustice acting as a counterweight to everything that's worthwhile about life on Earth.

To eat, drink, and wake in tangled sheets beside the sweet warmth of a new lover - that's all great. Hearing the

morning's first question: "So you already got herpes, right?" Not so great....

For every rose that you pluck on Earth, you'll have to wade through a pile of shit - and watch out for the pricks.

By now you should be wondering why your world seems so broken, why almost everyone gets a harsh allotment of misery. A child diagnosed with Tay-Sachs disease, a drunk driver swerving into your lane on a rain-swept winter night, a Mako shark that mistook your beloved third wife for a harbor seal... the list of potential calamities is endless. Even your best years can be seasoned with horror.

You also might be wondering why the mass media celebrates fame and lust and power while mocking modesty and spiritual contentment. Or why multinational pharmaceutical corporations, bent banks, and blackhearted oil, gas, and agricultural biotech companies seem so intent on destroying the health, wealth, and habitat of most of the world's population.

In your STS-oriented world, the unfettered greed of the few always seems to outweigh the needs of the many. In the long run, it isn't supposed to be that way. But in the short term, it sure as hell makes it easier for those vampiric entities that feed on Loosh to sink their astral fangs into you.

So how do you escape your predicament? By becoming one of them?

No way!

It's time for you to start chasing Gnosis.

Face it: most of the time you're walking around in a stupor, enslaved inside a physical body in a screwed up, material world. If you don't think so, try recalling what it

felt like the last time you had the flu, or a fever so high that it brought on the chills. Did you feel like a bulletproof Nietzschean übermensch then? No? We didn't think so.

To awaken from the stupefaction of being in a body, you need to develop spiritual self-awareness. You're more than just your body. A Divine Spark is within you, and so on.... But here's the thing: the specific spiritual knowledge - or Gnosis - that leads to spiritual self-awareness is only partially to be found in books. The rest of it can't be acquired through reading, blind faith, slavish devotion to the Mosaic code, or tithing fifteen percent of your annual income to some bogus church. It can only come to you through revelatory experience. Which is why you can't just kill yourself and collect a Get Out of Earth Jail Free card when you pass to the Other Side. You'll just keep getting sent back for more earthly incarnations until you know better.

Those revelatory experiences we're talking about will start happening to you once you've committed to chasing Gnosis. That commitment, made sincerely, is an astral signaling event. As soon as you make it, the Invisible College's Earth Coincidence Control Office (ECCO) will focus in on you and start offering their assistance by controlling your coincidences, thereby providing you with all the revelations you'll need to attain full-blown Gnosis - provided you keep up the chase. Arranging meaningful coincidences is easy for an organization that operates from the astral plane, above (but not beyond) the three-dimensional Cartesian matrix of your objectivity-based worldview, occurring in what you perceive as linear time. We make earthly coincidences happen all the time from non-time.

ECCO, in other words, is dedicated to providing any and all Gnosis-seeking humans with the personalized life lessons they require to transcend material existence on Earth and stop returning to it.

Sounds great, right? No more death, no more taxes. But be forewarned: The Invisible College's life lessons can sometimes seem absolutely ruthless (although, in truth, we always try to minimize your hardships). And you will be taught those lessons whether you like them or not.

Gordon is about to embark on a revelatory experience that, if he had a choice, he might want to avoid.

"Too fucking bad..." we say, in the nicest way possible.



FINDING JIMMY

Lloyd wasn't kidding... Swannson Lumber, Inc. really did burn to the ground. My mother was so distraught that she refused to let Derek go hang out with me in Cambria until school started. She seemed to want him around for emotional support. We, of course, told her nothing about what we'd seen and heard at Lloyd's house. Arnie would probably blab the whole story to her soon enough. Derek knew to deny everything. As far as he was concerned, he'd never even met Lloyd.

Just before we'd left him, Lloyd had asked me to try tracking down James in Los Angeles. James had apparently severed all contact with him right after they'd met for lunch a few weeks earlier. "That's unlike Jimmy," Lloyd had said. He seemed concerned, but he acknowledged the possibility that he may have merely said something to which his nephew took offense. We both knew that James could be a delicate flower when it came to matters of his ego. It was far too easy to provoke his narcissistic rage with a careless joke or a supposed slight. It really didn't take much.

I asked Lloyd why he wanted *me* to go after James, when he seemed to have the entire U.S. intelligence community at his disposal. He answered, quite simply: "There are those in the intelligence community who might not have Jimmy's best interests at heart - especially in light of what you and I just did to Project MONARCH."

That made sense. I promised Lloyd that right after I got back to Cambria, I would drive down to L.A. in my beat-up yellow Jeep and have a look.



When I get back to Cambria, there aren't any new messages from James on my answering machine - and he hasn't left me a forwarding address - so early the next morning, I load up my Jeep and just start driving south. I'm hoping synchronicity and psychic magnetism will lead me to James, just like it led me to Kayleigh when I was in Amsterdam.

James said he and Rina were looking to buy a house in Malibu or Bel Air, so I figure I'll try Malibu first. But I've never driven anywhere near L.A. before. Around Thousand Oaks, I start to lose my bearings. There's too much traffic. Too many confusing road signs. And *way* too many honking assholes blowing past me on both sides, going at least thirty mph above the legal speed limit. I'm pretty frazzled by the time I finally pull off the highway to figure out where I am.

Somehow, despite having a road map, I've missed Malibu entirely. I've ended up in Pacific Palisades instead. Strangely, Pacific Palisades is the first place in L.A. that looks familiar to me - like it's *right* somehow - although maybe that's just because I know that Henry Miller and Buckminster Fuller used to live there.

I feel a strong connection to Henry Miller because I read most of his books while I was at Esalen, not that far from where he used to live before he moved to Pacific Palisades. One sunny day I even hiked up the steep trail to see the old cabin where he wrote *Big Sur and the Oranges of*

Hieronymus Bosch. I also used to hang out with Emil White, one of Miller's best friends, at the Henry Miller Memorial Library, near Nepenthe (my favorite restaurant – great food and great views from the deck overlooking the Big Sur coastline).

And I feel connected to Bucky, of course, because I used to bang his nympho stoner witch niece.

As an added bit of trivia, I recall someone once telling me that the movie adaptation of Stephen King's *Carrie* had been filmed at Palisades High School. That's a movie I can relate to – although Sissy Spacek's remote influencing blowout as a pig-blood-covered Prom Queen makes my psychic abilities look incredibly wimpy in comparison.

I start concentrating on James, trying to get a psychic feel for where he might be as I make random turns, left and right, along Pacific Palisades' neighborhood streets. I get a nebulous vision in my mind's eye that he's hanging out at a party. A backyard somewhere with a rectangular swimming pool and people laughing too loud while standing around drinking white wine spritzers and Mexican beer. Just like what I'd imagine an L.A. party would be like – nothing so amazingly psychic there.

But then – *fuckin'-A!* – I see James' 1967 Corvette parked in front of a house up ahead. There's no mistaking it, with the red hourglass shape on its gleaming black hood scoop and the **NTSHADE** vanity plates. This is too amazing! I pass by and have to keep driving for another few blocks until I can find a parking space big enough for my Jeep. The street is lined on both sides, bumper to bumper, with expensive-looking cars: BMWs, Range Rovers, Mercedes convertibles, plenty of Porsches, and even a red Ferrari and a long silver

Bentley. My faded yellow Jeep, with its rust spots and knobby Goodyear radials, looks woefully out-of-place.

There's no telling which house James might be in. As I walk back to his Corvette, it occurs to me that I might have to just sit in it and wait until James ventures outside to drive someplace. I'm a patient guy. It wouldn't be so hard for me to wait around - especially since James has conveniently left the Corvette's top down, open like a boat, with the oxblood red leather seats awash in sunlight.

Pacific Palisades must have a low crime rate.

I'm about to climb into James' car when I see a man with a familiar-looking face approaching me. He's smiling expansively, wearing a beautiful tan linen suit, an azure shirt open at the neck, and chunky motorcycle boots.

It's Dan Aykroyd.

Ghostbusters, Blues Brothers, Doctor Detroit, a Wild and Crazy Guy... my mind reels through all roles I've seen Dan Aykroyd in as he reaches out to shake my hand.

"You here for the party?" he asks me.

James must be at that party... it would make perfect sense.

Since I don't answer right away, Dan Aykroyd continues: "I know you from Lily Dale, right?"

"I don't think we've met," I manage to say.

"Really?" he says in that characteristic, smart-alecky tone of his. "I could swear you look just like a Spiritualist I know."

"Maybe he's my doppelgänger. I'll try to avoid Lily Dale from now on so we don't hurt each other."

Dan Aykroyd laughs, but it comes out sounding more like a rebuke: *Tut-tut!*

One of his eyes is brown, I notice, while the other one is green. I say, "I'm Gordon, by the way." He still hasn't let go of my hand. "But my friends call me Crash."

Jesus, why did I say that? So stupid....

"Well, Crash Gordon, are you here for the birthday party?"

"I wasn't invited," I admit, "but a friend of mine's here, who I really need to see."

"Well, c'mon then! Follow me. I'll bring you in as my guest."

"Great! Thanks!" I say. We walk up a curved driveway toward a nice-looking, but not ostentatious, Colonial-style home.

"My wife couldn't make it today. She's in Ontario."

"That's too bad. Whose birthday is it, anyway?" I ask.

"Steve Martin's. It's sort of a surprise. Marty Short is hosting it. This is his house."

My stomach does a back flip. Steve Martin may be even more scarily famous than Dan Aykroyd. And Martin Short can be as funny as either of them. I'm feeling way out of my depth.

"So who's your friend?" Dan Aykroyd asks me as he opens a gate on the right side of the house that leads into the backyard.

"James Marrsden?" I say. It comes out my mouth with a rise at the end, like a question.

"Haven't met him yet," he says, clapping a strong hand on my back as we pass through the gate. "But I've heard good things! Marty just signed on for the movie they'll be making from that funny little vampire book your friend wrote."

I guess things are moving pretty fast for James down here.

"There he is..." I say, pointing.

James stands talking to the Goth-haired movie director, Tim Burton, who has been in the media a lot lately, doing press for *Batman* and his upcoming movie with Johnny Depp, *Edward Scissorhands*. I wonder if James is trying to convince Burton to direct *Vampirism Made Easy* next. A blue-green rectangular swimming pool full of shrieking kids and cannonballers is just behind them.

"Well, I'll let you say hello while I go off to find Steve and Marty," Dan Aykroyd says, giving my shoulder a friendly shake. "But come spend some time with me later. I've got a strong sense there's something you and I need to talk about."

"What could that be?" I ask, wondering.

"I'm not sure. I just get these hunches sometimes. Do you know anything about UFOs?"

"That's must be it," I say. "I've written a few newspaper stories about UFOs." *Only one, really, but it was split up into multiple parts....*

"A fascinating subject! We'll talk." He smiles at me one last time and merges into the crowd.

The backyard is full of people standing around in groups on the lawn, or seated in lounge chairs, laughing, hugging, and talking like old friends. Just glancing around, I see Nora Ephron, Tom Hanks, Steve Martin, Walter Matthau, Chevy Chase, Goldie Hawn, Billy Crystal, and Jamie Lee Curtis... so many famous faces that it seems I must be the only nobody there.

James has seen me now. He shoots me a dirty look. Then he shakes Tim Burton's hand and walks away from him to come over to where I'm standing.

"Crash! What the hell are *you* doing here?"

"Lloyd asked me to check up on you. He's worried because you haven't been returning his calls."

"That fat bastard worries too much. I'm fine. I just got a new phone number, that's all. But how'd you find me?"

I shrug. "I just got in my Jeep and drove."

"I can't believe they let you in here! This is supposed to be a private party."

"I know... Steve Martin's birthday. Dan Aykroyd got me in."

"Since when do you know *Dan-fucking-Aykroyd*?"

"I don't. We just kind of hit it off in the driveway."

"This is too weird."

"I know. Tell me about it...."

"Try not to embarrass me, okay?"

"Okay, I'll *try*..." I say with a hint of sarcasm, wondering if my mere presence is enough to embarrass the new Hollywood James, my used-to-be best friend. "Hey, I heard Martin Short's gonna be in your movie. Is Tim Burton directing it?"

James glances around to make sure we can't be overheard. "Tim Burton is a one-trick pony," he says to me, confidentially. "Everyone acts like his shit is gonna be in the Museum of Modern Art someday, but there's no way I'd let him direct my movie. I'm holding out for Dario Argento."

"Huh." Known for his gruesome Italian horror films, Argento seems like a poor choice for a lighthearted vampire

frolic. Tim Burton's whimsical style of surrealism would be a much better fit, to my way of thinking. But what do I know, right?

"You wouldn't believe how many shitty movies are getting made these days," James says, like he's already a film industry veteran. "There's this new one called *Green Card* coming out around Christmas. People have been telling me it's so great, but I read the script the other day and it's just about the stupidest thing, ever. They need me out here, Crash."

"I'm sure they do, James."

"No. You don't understand. They really *need me*. I already have, like, three screenplay deals lined up."

"Have you done any writing since you got here?"

"No, but I'm workin' on it. Rina and I just bought this house up in Topanga Canyon. It needs a little work, so that's been taking all my time lately."

"That, and going to parties..." I observe.

"Hey, you *have to* go to the parties out here. It's part of doing business. Besides, it's Steve Martin's birthday! How cool is that?"

"Pretty cool," I admit. "Where's Rina? Is she around?"

"Right behind you, Crash," Rina says, tickling my ribs.

I jump and turn around. "Jeez! You snuck right up on me!"

"You're the sneaky one. I can't believe you got into this party." Rina is wearing a long lilac dress of shantung silk held up by tiny spaghetti straps. No bra. Her nipples are standing up, as usual. She looks pretty good for a mind-controlled assassin.

“Talk to Dan Aykroyd...” says James, “*he* let him in.”

“You know Dan Aykroyd?” Rina asks me.

I tell her how we met. “I think he’s into UFOs,” I say, as if that somehow explains everything.

“Billy Zalupa’s into UFOs, big-time,” Rina says with a knowing nod. I follow her gaze. There’s the famed Billy Zalupa – Rina’s co-star in the international mega-hit, *Lap Dance Me Deadly* – standing over by the fence behind the pool, looking resplendent in a shimmery grey Armani suit. He’s talking to someone who looks like Robin Williams. It *is* Robin Williams, I realize. I recall that he and Steve Martin did “Waiting for Godot” together a few years ago.

“How do you know Billy Zalupa’s so into UFOs?” James asks Rina with an edge to his voice.

Billy Zalupa’s performance as a rogue cop working undercover as a Chippendales dancer in *Lap Dance Me Deadly* had garnered raves from the critics. They were hailing him as the new John Travolta. The tabloids had linked him with Rina around the time of the movie’s debut. Rina’s hula-hooping “IllumiNaughty” striptease number with Billy had become one of the most talked-about scenes in the history of kitsch cinema. *Fame Whore* even went so far as to claim they’d re-enacted the infamous scene to lure Winona Ryder into a *ménage à trois* after the trio had gone on a shoplifting spree in St. Tropez.

James might have reason to be feeling a tad insecure.

“How do I know? It’s not because I had sex with him, if that’s what you’re worried about. I think he’s gay,” Rina tells James. “He’s into aliens because he’s a Scientologist. All those guys are into aliens and UFOs once they get to OT Three.”

“What’s OT Three?” I have to ask.

“It’s so friggin’ weird...” Rina sighs. “You know how Scientology’s whole scam is to keep people moving ‘Up the Bridge’ – paying more and more money for all these courses that supposedly make them super spiritually enlightened? First you go Clear, like Leonard Cohen sang about in ‘Famous Blue Raincoat.’ Then there are all these different OT Levels: OT One, OT Two... all the way up to OT Eight or Nine.”

“OT stands for Operating Thetan,” James fills in. “It means you’re some kind of Scientology Alien Wizard Person with special powers. Like you can cure herpes and shit.”

“*Ooh*, sign me up,” I say.

“Yeah, well, anyway...” Rina continues, “someone like Billy Zalupa has probably given the Church of Scientology at least a hundred thousand dollars by the time he gets to OT Three. So the super-secret spiritual information on that level has to be something really incredible to make people think they’re getting their money’s worth.”

“Remember, L. Ron Hubbard was a science fiction writer first, before he started his own religion,” James reminds me.

“Yeah,” Rina says, “so what L. Ron Hubbard came up with was this story about Xenu, this badass galactic warlord who rounded up all the Thetans in the universe about 75 million years ago by telling them their tax returns were getting audited. Then, while they were all standing in line at the galactic IRS center, him and a bunch of evil psychiatrists stuck big needles in the Thetans’ lungs and filled them up with freezing cold alcohol – because Xenu was mean. After that, Xenu loaded all the drunk, frozen Thetans onto

spaceships that look just like our own DC-8 airline jets and then he flew them to our planet, Earth - which is really supposed to be called Teegugack, or something. Once he got here, Xenu dumped the stacks of frozen Thetans into big volcanoes just like he was frying fish sticks, and then he blew them all up with a bunch of H-bombs, just to make sure they were really good and dead. But what Xenu didn't realize was that Thetans *can't* die - not really - so now there're all these radioactive ghost Thetans cruising around, all mashed up and sticky. And some of them get stuck on us. You, me... everyone has at least a few mushy Thetans stuck to their bodies - "

"- and they fuck you up," James finishes for her.

"I thought that's what your mum and dad were for," I say, making an oblique reference to the famous Philip Larkin poem: *"They fuck you up, your mum and dad / They may not mean to, but they do...."*

James and Rina just give me blank stares. My Monty Pythonesque accent apparently hasn't helped them make the connection.

I feel like a dweeb. To hide my embarrassment, I say: "I remember reading an interview in *Penthouse* with L. Ron Hubbard's son, who said that Scientology is basically a 'soul cracking' cult based on the rituals of black magick, stretched out over a lifetime."

"They're into some freaky shit, that's for sure," says Rina. "I heard that when Tom Cruise got to OT Three and found out about Xenu and the blown-up Thetans, he almost had a full-on nervous breakdown."

"Why?" I wonder. "It's just sci-fi Gnosticism. When we were in high school, we had a theory like that about orgone

monsters. Remember, James?”

“Right,” says James. “You can’t see ‘em, but they’re in the air all around us, sucking up our energy. And the worst thing is, if you inhale a baby orgone monster, it’ll kill you with spontaneous human combustion.”

“Take *that*, L. Ron Hubbard!” I say. “You’re not the only science fiction writer who can start a new religion.”

“Yeah, but L. Ron Hubbard was like the greatest con artist who ever lived,” says Rina. “You guys are way too innocent, compared to him.”

“Hey, I’m not *that* innocent...” James retorts.

“No, you’re not, actually,” Rina says, humoring him. “But you’re not ripping people off like Ron did. I mean, that guy had people paying fifty grand or more whenever they got to OT Three, because on that level the Church is supposed to get rid of all the mushed up Thetans stuck on you. My dad could explain it to you a lot better than I can. He took care of Ron for the last two years of his life. That’s how I know all this stuff. He was living in a Blue Bird motorhome out near our ranch in Creston, just past Kenny Rogers’ place.”

“Wait a sec... L. Ron Hubbard lived in Creston?” I had no idea.

“Yeah, he was hiding out from all the lawsuits and pissed off people trying to put him in jail. He was also having a lot of trouble with his pancreas around then. My dad’s a naturopath – and a big-time Scientologist – so he was helping look after him. But after two years, Ron had a stroke and died, like, a week later. This was back in 1986, when I was around nineteen or twenty.”

“Sometimes she tells Scientologists that she had L. Ron Hubbard’s love-child, just to mess with their heads,” James

tells me.

Rina nods. "I do. It's kinda fun - but also a little evil, I guess. Most of them believe me. But I really *did* know L. Ron Hubbard. He had bad breath and he was always staring at my tits."

"That's because they're mighty fine tits," says James, putting his arm around Rina's waist and cupping her right breast.

"It's amazing that you knew L. Ron Hubbard," I say. "And what about Steve Martin? How do you know him?"

"I was up for a role in his movie, *L.A. Story*," Rina says. "I was supposed to play this cute little bouncy character named SanDeE*... only at the last minute they gave it to Sarah Jessica Parker instead - that bitch."

"Eat me, Rina," Sarah Jessica Parker says, walking past us from the back gate, flashing a big, lopsided grin.

"David Lynch likes me better than you, you cheap chintzy whore!" Rina shouts after her.

"You can have him," Parker shouts back without turning around. Then she does turn around, bending at the knees with both hands held low to the ground, flipping Rina off. "I hope you like cherry pie and chocolate milkshakes from Bob's Big Boy, slut." She whips back around and goes scampering over to Steve Martin, who embraces her like she's his long-lost daughter.

Turning to me, Rina says, "We're friends..." - in case that wasn't obvious.



"I've spoken to some people who saw those Black Deltas flying over the Hudson Valley at three miles an hour," Dan Aykroyd says to me right after I've given him a brief overview of Skeeze's alien abduction and Lloyd's investigations for the Collins Elite. "Local news outlets treated it like a mass hallucination. But if they're hallucinations, then why did they show up on video cameras and film? They were coming and going like taxis."

"No way! You guys are blowing my mind!" says Billy Zalupa.

Billy Zalupa is sitting with Rina, Dan Aykroyd, and me at a round teak table beside the pool in Martin Short's backyard. We're all drinking cold bottles of Pacifico, along with shots of Patrón tequila (Aykroyd's idea). James is off somewhere chatting up the other celebrities. He told me earlier that he didn't want to be associated with any 'nutzoid UFO talk' so I've omitted the fact that Lloyd happens to be James' uncle.

"C'mon, Billy..." says Rina, "you're a pilot. You must see UFOs all the time."

Even I'd seen the recent *Vanity Fair* cover that Annie Leibovitz shot in the pimped out cabin of Billy's personal twin turboprop cargo plane: Billy flashing his sweet, dopey grin with an airline captain's hat set at a rakish tilt on his handsome head.

"Nope," says Billy, shaking that same head like a hound with ticks in its ears. "I've never seen a UFO, I swear."

"Well, I have," Dan Aykroyd admits. "I saw my first one in Martha's Vineyard. I got up to pee off my balcony one night around three in the morning and while I was out there looking up at the stars I saw two perfect circles flying in

tandem at about 100,000 feet. I could estimate how high they were because I knew the Concorde's flight path usually went past our house at 50,000 feet. Those two circles must have been going at least 20,000 miles an hour. They did a beautiful zigzag and then they were gone. Three other people saw it with me."

"Hold on..." I say. "You and three other people were peeing off your balcony? Those must be some wild parties you're throwing out on Martha's Vineyard."

"It was just me peeing," Dan Aykroyd clarifies with a gruff laugh. "It's just something I like to do, even though it's probably not that great for the plants. I spoke to the other eyewitnesses the next day."

"That is *so wild!*" Billy says, open-mouthed with wonder.

"If you should ever decide to look into it, Billy, I think you'll be amazed by how many famous people like yourself have seen UFOs. Even Ronald Reagan saw a few of them while he was Governor of California."

"Was Nancy with him?" Rina asks.

"For the first one, yes. Ron and Nancy had been invited to a party at William Holden's house in Hollywood and they showed up late. According to a public account by Lucille Ball, who was already at the party, Ron and Nancy said they'd seen a UFO while they were driving down the coast to Los Angeles and they'd stopped to watch it. I can't say with any certainty whether they experienced an episode of 'missing time' - or if the UFO actually landed right in front of them - but I've heard some unsubstantiated rumors to that effect."

"So Ronald Reagan could've been our first abducted President," I surmise.

“Unlikely, but that would explain a lot, wouldn’t it?” Dan Aykroyd says with a grin. “Reagan’s second UFO encounter happened in 1974, while he was in a Cessna Citation being flown by Air Force Colonel Bill Paynter. They were making a landing approach in Bakersfield when they noticed a strange light tailing the plane. At Reagan’s request, they turned the plane around and started following it. Paynter said it was a fairly steady glowing white ball until it began to accelerate. Then ‘it appeared to elongate’ and took off ‘like a hotrod.’ Somehow, it seems the extra-dimensional occupants of certain UFOs have figured out a way to manipulate the atoms of their vessels and turn them into light.”

“Holy crap!” Billy says. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Maybe you should try flying into Bakersfield more often. Obviously, Reagan’s a big believer in UFOs now. That’s probably why, at his first summit meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, Reagan said in a toast that if we ever found out there was ‘some alien life form that was going to attack the Earth approaching on Halley’s Comet,’ it would bring together all the people of the world. He said pretty much the same thing to the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1987, as you might recall.”

“Does anyone know if *Gorbachev* has seen any UFOs?” I ask.

“Not to my knowledge, but are any of you aware of the Voronezh Incident?”

“What’s that?” Rina asks.

“It’s the Russian equivalent of the Roswell Incident. We only know about it because of Gorbachev’s *glasnost* policy,

which called for more government transparency in the USSR and a new openness to western ideas, resulting in greater freedom for the Soviet press. The Voronezh Incident was actually written up by the Soviet press agency, *TASS*, so it became known to almost everyone in the Soviet Union. The first news article about it was published just a few years ago, in the fall of 1989.”

“So what happened?” Billy asks with sunlight glinting off his pearly white teeth.

“Well, first off, you should know that Voronezh is an industrial city of close to a million people, located approximately three hundred miles south of Moscow. So this isn’t some isolated little Siberian village full of credulous reindeer herders we’re talking about. This incident was seen by hundreds of urban dwellers – and their eyewitness accounts all matched up.”

As Dan Aykroyd tells it, the incident began with a pinkish glow in the sky at around six in the evening, while it was still light out. According to witnesses, the pink glow morphed into a deep red ovoid UFO about 45-feet across and 18-feet high. It circled a city park and then it blinked out of existence for a few seconds. Then it reappeared, hovering, just above the park’s tree line near a group of grade-school children who had been playing a game of soccer.

Adult onlookers rushed to the scene as a hatch opened in the lower part of the vessel and an alien about nine feet tall looked out of the opening. It had no neck and its head seemed too small for its large body. *Pinhead Aliens Invade Russia!* was how an American newspaper account described it later.

“Not *Coneheads*, just so we’re clear... *Pinheads*.”

“Ha!” Billy laughs, getting the reference to Aykroyd’s old “Saturday Night Live” role as Beldar the Conehead.

The alien had long arms and three luminous eyes in its knobby little head – two glowing white and a swiveling red one, up a little higher toward the middle. It was wearing bronze boots and silvery overalls with a disk at the center of its chest. After a quick look around, it closed the hatch and the UFO landed in the park on four descending support legs.

The hatch opened again and the nine-foot tall alien and two others just like it came out, followed by a boxy little robot with push buttons on its chest. They proceeded to take some soil samples. Then the lead alien shot a beam of light from the disk on its chest, which created a number of luminous triangles and rectangles on the ground.

One of the schoolboys watching from nearby got so frightened that he let out a shout. The alien looked over at him with its three glowing eyes and the boy froze up, finding himself unable to move. The other witnesses began shouting as panic rippled through the crowd.

Then, in the blink of an eye, the UFO and its alien crew vanished. It seemed as if they’d never been there. But five minutes later they were back, instantaneously reappearing in the exact spot where they’d disappeared. One of the aliens was now holding a ‘tube’ about a foot long. It aimed the tube at a sixteen-year-old boy close by and the boy was seemingly vaporized. That didn’t go over very well with the crowd, but before they could decide what to do about it, the aliens got back in their craft and it slowly rose up into the sky. Just as it was disappearing from sight, the vanished sixteen-year-old boy miraculously reappeared, unharmed.

"And that my friends, is the story of the Voronezh Incident," Dan Aykroyd concludes, "brought to us by Mikhail Gorbachev and his forward-thinking *glasnost* policy."

We all agree that the story is undeniably weird. If it's also true, the implications are staggering. The Soviet intelligence agencies must have decided *glasnost* needed some fine-tuning, because after that one got out there hadn't been any news reports even remotely like it coming from Russia since.

"Y'know, there's an argument to be made that the Esalen Institute helped get the ball rolling on *glasnost*," I say.

"How so?" Dan Aykroyd asks me.

"Well, Michael Murphy, Esalen's founder, has always been interested in paranormal abilities: ESP, remote viewing, telekinesis, and all that...."

"Crash spent five years at Esalen as their psychic guinea pig," Rina blurts out. I guess she's been talking to James.

"Really? I'd like to hear about that," Dan Aykroyd says. "But finish what you were saying about Esalen and *glasnost* first."

"Right. So Michael Murphy somehow found out that a lot of psychic discoveries were being made behind the Iron Curtain. So he went over there with his wife, Dulce, and they made some friends. And that led to Esalen starting up the Soviet-American Exchange Program in 1980."

"So they were sending psychics back and forth between Esalen and Moscow?" Aykroyd asks, intrigued.

"Not just psychics," I say. "All kinds of people. Rusty Schweickart, the astronaut, went over there on the Esalen ticket. He was the first guy to pilot the Lunar Module, on

Apollo 9. I've met him. He lectures at Esalen sometimes. Nice guy. Anyway, Rusty started the Association of Space Explorers, which promotes the idea that all nations of the world should cooperate in our efforts to explore outer space. He went to Moscow in 1983 to sell the Soviets on the idea - and they loved it. But NASA got all pissy about it and said only retired astronauts like Rusty could be in the program. I guess they were afraid our active-duty astronauts might give the Soviet cosmonauts ideas."

"It also may have had something to do with Reagan's plans for the Strategic Defense Initiative," Dan Aykroyd fills in. "Lasers in space. It was threatening to re-ignite the arms race. I know it was making the Russians extremely nervous, around 1983."

"Right - the 'Star Wars' Initiative. That right-wing bastard, Joseph Coors, and his Heritage Foundation think tank came up with that one. It was the exact opposite of what Rusty was proposing."

"You have to wonder if Reagan thought he could shoot down UFOs with it, considering his history."

"It was just a bad idea, all around," I say. "It could have turned the Cold War into a hot mess. But then Gorbachev came along in 1985, and things started getting better. Esalen started bringing his economic advisers to the U.S. - 'Hot Tub Diplomacy' they called it. A lot of their ideas for better U.S.-Soviet economic relations ended up being implemented. And then they snagged the big fish: Esalen sponsored Boris Yeltsin's first trip to America in 1989."

Yeltsin had been in the news lately. Known as Gorbachev's most powerful political rival, Yeltsin had resigned from the Communist Party just a month earlier after delivering a dramatic speech in which he expressed his frustration with

the slow pace of reform and restructuring – or *perestroika* – in the Soviet Union. His resignation only seemed to increase his popularity with the Russian people. There was even talk that Yeltsin might end up as Russia’s next leader.

“When I was in Russia filming *Stalin Says*, someone told me that Yeltsin likes to booze it up,” says Rina. “Do you know if that’s true?”

“I heard he got a little drunk on the American tour,” I confirm. “But the real story is that he had a huge revelation while he was visiting a supermarket in Houston. When he saw all the shelves crammed full of food that almost anyone here can afford to eat, he said it made him sick with despair for his people and furious at the lies of Soviet propaganda. Most Russians were living in poverty when there was no reason why their country couldn’t be as rich as America. Yeltsin went home a committed reformer, determined to replace the fraudulence of Marxist ideology with the prosperity and efficiencies of American capitalism. He’s been nagging Gorbachev about it ever since.”

Laughing, Dan Aykroyd says, “It sounds like mind-control might be in play here. We have to be vigilant. Could Esalen’s psychic spies now be controlling Yeltsin’s thoughts? Or a CIA hypnotist?”

“We can’t rule that out,” I say, semi-seriously. It’s definitely a possibility, considering what I know about Project MONARCH.



The sun looks like a low-hanging peach in the garish, fuchsia-tinted sky by the time we finally leave Steve Martin’s birthday party. I get in my Jeep and follow James

and Rina in the Corvette toward Malibu, past all the jogging porn stars and sun tanning script readers along the beach west of the Pacific Coast Highway. Then we make a right and climb miles of winding two-lane blacktop up into the dark mons of Topanga Canyon. Billy Zalupa brings up the rear of our little caravan in his silver, open-topped, vintage racing Porsche. We'd invited Dan Aykroyd to come along with us, too, but he already had plans to meet Bill Murray to hash out the script for the third *Ghostbusters* movie over dinner.

"Next time," he promised.

None of us should really be driving after all the beer and tequila we've slugged down, but that's the way it's done in L.A., I was told. James actually laughed at me when I asked if we could walk to his new house and go back for our cars in the morning.

James and Rina's house is perched high on its own hilltop at the end of a long private driveway. It's a Spanish-style hacienda with Antoni Gaudí flourishes: two tall, circular towers with white adobe walls and terracotta roof tiles, conjoined by a cantilevered common room built to look like the arcade from an old Franciscan monastery. We park our cars in the vast adobe brick courtyard and get out, threading our way past artfully placed boulders and dusky green succulents.

Just beyond the common room's threshold, we encounter a huge, semi-circular bar made of lacquered yellow bamboo stalks with its own thatched roof of dried palm fronds. It looks incongruous within the otherwise dignified setting of vaulted plank ceilings and polished terracotta tile floors – like it was airlifted straight from a Polynesian dive bar to fulfill an alcoholic's fantasy of upscale living. There's even

an authentic Honolulu stench of cockroaches and coconut oil.

"Welcome to the Topanga Tiki Lounge," says James, ducking behind the bar's counter. He emerges with a bottle of Kahlúa and four obsidian shot glasses carved in the shape of miniature Easter Island heads. He pours the coffee-flavored liqueur into the Moais' hollowed out skulls with a frat boy bartender's sloshed elan.

"To your new home, guys," Billy says, raising one of the tiny heads in a toast. "Cool digs."

"It sure beats a one-room cabin in Cambria," I chime in.

That's an understatement. Aside from the tacky bar, the house has an almost Hearst Castle-like grandeur. To our right, there's a cavernous fireplace set deep into the double-height white adobe interior wall. Past the bar, facing west, twelve enormous arched windows look out onto a kingly vista of the deep blue Pacific, far below steep hillsides of chaparral.

It's a nice place, but I wouldn't want to live there during brushfire season.

"So Rina, what're you acting in these days?" asks Billy.

"One Saliva Bubble."

That's the name of the new film, Rina explains, that she'll soon be starring in with Steve Martin and Martin Short. She just signed the contract for it last week. David Lynch and Mark Frost wrote the script. Lynch will be directing after he wraps the movie he's currently working on: *Wild At Heart*.

"What's it about?" I ask, thinking how great it must be for Rina and Billy to have the stages of their lives so clearly demarcated by the movies they star in. It must give them a

sense of accomplishment that my relatively undocumented, inconsequential life seems to lack.

"It's sort of a comedy," Rina begins.

"Sort of... because they don't want it to be *too* funny, right?" James interrupts with a smirk.

"Oh, fuck off, James," Rina says. "You know what I mean. Steve Martin's in it. *Of course* it'll be funny. But it's also weird, like a David Lynch movie." She downs her Kahlúa shot in a single gulp.

"So what's it about?" I ask her again.

"It's about this, uhm, top secret military base where a redneck janitor's spit short-circuits a computer. His gross saliva bubble makes this 'Star Wars'-type satellite aim down on a little American town where they already have a bunch of problems with electricity. And the satellite's laser beam, or whatever, causes a bunch of people's personalities to switch bodies. And then it somehow makes this giant, green, two-headed pig - which everyone thinks might have a bomb in it that can destroy the world. Only instead, it actually poops out the best barbeque sauce that anybody's ever tasted."

"Sounds bizarre," I say.

"Yeah, the script's pretty out there..." Rina admits, "but I trust David to make sense of it. He's a genius, after all."

"How'd you hook up with David Lynch in the first place?" Billy asks her. "I'd love to act in one of his movies someday."

"I met him a couple years ago, when he was having auditions for a movie called *Goddess* that he wanted to make," Rina explains. "It was supposed to be about the last days of Marilyn Monroe's life, only they had to change her

name in the script to Rosilyn Ramsay so they wouldn't get sued."

"Marilyn bit it in Brentwood, not all that far from here," James adds as an aside.

"Yeah, so anyway, this was before *Stalin Says* came out, when nobody really knew me..." Rina continues, "but some casting director saw my headshot and thought I'd be perfect for David's movie. So I went in, and David thought I'd be perfect for it, too. He said it was so cool that my name was Rina Rowley and the character's name was Rosilyn Ramsay. Freaky, right? So pretty soon we were all set to go, but then the producers figured out that the guy in the script who kills Marilyn - or *Rosilyn* - is really supposed to be Bobby Kennedy, even though *his* name had been changed, too."

"Norman Mailer thinks government spooks offed Marilyn with a Nembutal enema to cover up her affair with Bobby Kennedy," James fills in. "The guy whose book the *Goddess* screenplay was based on thought pretty much the same thing."

"I thought JFK was one she had the affair with," I say.

"Him, too," says James, nodding his head, "along with Frank Sinatra and a whole bunch of other guys who treated her like some ditzy trophy slut."

Rina sums up: "It would be kind of like if I had an affair with Sylvester Stallone and then I went and fucked Sly's brother, Frank, too, while I was having orgies on the side with Axl Rose and Duff McKagen. It'd be way embarrassing for everyone, if people found out. Warner Brothers was afraid of pissing off the Kennedys, I guess, so the movie never got made. But David and I stayed friends - and he

gave me a part on his TV show, 'Twin Peaks,' while we've been waiting for *One Saliva Bubble* to start filming."

"'Twin Peaks' is so awesome!" Billy effuses. "Have you seen it?" he asks me.

"One of the drawbacks to living in a one-room cabin way up on a cliff is that I can't get cable. And my TV reception sucks. So no," I explain, "I haven't seen it - but I've heard about it."

"Dude, you have to see it!" says Billy.

"It's right up your alley, Crash," says Rina. "Especially the episodes we're working on now, for next season. They get into Project BLUE BOOK, messages from outer space, owls, and this supernatural place in the woods called the Black Lodge, where people eat... what's it called again, James?"

"*Garmonbozia*," James pronounces with a Bela Lugosi accent. "It's just like Loosh - they're feeding on fear and suffering. Only on 'Twin Peaks' the fear and suffering looks like creamed corn and this creepy little dwarf sucks it backwards off a spoon in the Black Lodge's waiting room."

"Are you serious? On network TV?"

"Rina has the scripts. You can read them yourself, if you don't believe me," says James. "You and David Lynch should get together. You guys'd have a lot to talk about."

"I could introduce you..." Rina offers.

"What's he like?" I ask.

She has a one-word answer: "Aloof."

I've always liked Rina, but it seems I may have underestimated her intelligence. I ask her: "Do you have any idea if David Lynch knew about Loosh from Robert Monroe's books on astral traveling?"

"I'll bet he did. David's really into Transcendental Meditation," she tells me. "Isn't that pretty much the same thing?"

Billy pokes out his lower lip like an outraged orangutan: "The guy who directed *Blue Velvet* is into Transcendental Meditation? That's just plain weird."

"No weirder than you being into Scientology," Rina counters.

"Hey, lots of famous actors are Scientologists," Billy says, sounding defensive. "That's how I met John Travolta and got my start out here. It was either that, or join AA."

"Fuck AA..." says James, pouring Billy another Easter Island head full of Kahlúa.

"Did I ever tell you I used to hang out with L. Ron Hubbard?" Rina coyly asks Billy.

"No way!" His glazed blue eyes go wide with astonishment. "You knew Ron?"

"Yep. I knew the Great and Powerful Ron, the founder of your crackpot religion."

"I don't believe it!"

"It's true, Billy. My dad was his doctor while Ron was living out of his motorhome in Creston, up the coast. You know I'm from there, right?"

"That is *so wild!*"

"Yeah. He even knocked me up."

"*What?*"

"L. Ron Hubbard inseminated me."

"Whoa! No fucking way!" Billy's mind is definitely being blown. "When did that happen?"

“When I was a teenager.”

“Where’s the, uh... what the... what happened to the baby?”

“He lives with my parents. They’re raising him to be the future messiah of Scientology.” Rina can barely keep a straight face, but Billy is apparently too drunk or mind-blown to notice.

“That’s awesome! I wanna meet the little guy!”

“Maybe we can fly up to Creston in your private jet someday and go see him,” Rina suggests.

“That’d be great! I’d *love* that. What’s his name?”

“Jelly Roll – after Jelly Roll Morton, Ron’s favorite jazz pianist,” says Rina, thinking fast. “He was really into jazz. You know that, right?”

James leans over to whisper a sarcasm in Rina’s ear: “*Good one!*”

Billy, oblivious, says: “I know! Ron was such a cool old jazz cat. Have you guys ever heard the soundtrack to his book, *Battlefield Earth*? It’s called *Space Jazz*. Ron recorded it with Chick Corea and Stanley Clarke.” Billy starts swaying his shoulders and snapping his fingers, as if he can hear L. Ron Hubbard’s immortal jazz melodies right there in the Topanga Tiki Lounge with us.

“*Space Jazz* was playing in the background when Ron raped me,” Rina says, her face contorting with silent laughter, which she manages to disguise as an emotional breakdown. For the first time, I’m actually impressed by her acting skills.

“Wait... Ron raped you?” asks Billy, doing a slow double take. “I didn’t think he did stuff like that.”

"He was a gross old man!" Rina wails. "Do you really think I wanted to give up my teenage virginity to him? He took it, Billy! With his super Scientology powers and his charisma, he just took it!"

"L. Ron Hubbard really traumatized the shit out of her," James adds for good measure. "If that big-nosed bastard was still alive, I'd have to go beat the crap out of him."

Billy wraps his muscular arms around Rina to comfort her. "I didn't know," he apologizes, kissing her hair. "No one ever told me. I mean, I knew Ron must've had a powerful sex engine, with all those wives and kids he had, but I didn't know he was a rapist."

"He tried to send me away on a Sea Org ship, but my dad wouldn't let him," Rina sobs, burying her face in Billy's pecs. She smears a snail trail of snot across the lapel of his Armani suit.

"That's terrible," Billy says, gazing up at the vaulted ceiling like a stoned pietà. "But at least you love the baby, right?"

Rina raises her head from his chest and looks into Billy's addled blue eyes. "He's six years old now and a stone cold psycho. My dad says he caught him torturing our bunnies."

"Little Peter Rabbits..." James elaborates with a frown.

"Oh," says Billy. "*Oh*.... Well, uh, has anyone hooked him up to an E-meter yet? Maybe Jelly Roll just needs some auditing."

"I think it's my fault - because I didn't breastfeed him," Rina laments. "I was too busy acting."

And this might be her finest performance yet.

“No. You can’t blame yourself...” Billy consoles her. He seems to believe her every word.

But then it occurs to me that Billy might be acting, too. Maybe *I’m* the only one who’s not in on the meta-joke. Rina and Billy could be putting on this performance just to mess with my head.

The most successful actors are probably all pathological liars, I think to myself, recalling an old witticism from Groucho Marx:

“The secret of life is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you’ve got it made!”



After Billy Zalupa says his goodbyes and gets back in his Porsche to drive off into the Topanga twilight, James and Rina make up a spare bedroom in one of the otherwise unoccupied adobe towers so I can spend the night. By the time I finally get up there, four or five hours later, I’m so drunk that I don’t remember falling asleep.

My first bleary glimpse of morning comes as a surprise – like I’ve just arisen from anesthesia. Oddly, I don’t feel hungover. I put my clothes back on, drink some water from the bathroom faucet, and then I go downstairs to find James already busy at the stainless steel appliances in his kitchen, making breakfast.

“Hey, man. How’d you sleep?” he asks me.

“Like a dead man,” I answer.

Over a breakfast of egg and cheese burritos with green salsa and hot sauce, James asks me if I can extend my stay. He says he misses the clacking of my typewriter – the sound

that inspired him to write *Vampirism Made Easy*. His three screenplay deadlines are looming and he hasn't written a single page for any of them.

"Maybe you could work on your book here," he suggests. "We could read our stuff to each other and get a little competition going again, just like the old days."

James appears to have already won that competition, but I don't resent his success at the moment. So I say: "Sure, I guess I could do that. All my bills are paid up in Cambria for another month – and it's not like I have a job to go back to. But are you sure you and Rina want me hanging around?"

"The truth is, Rina's been acting a little schizy since we moved in together. We've had some blowouts lately – then she's fine the next day, like nothing happened. I'm thinking she might calm down and start behaving better if she knew someone else was watching her. Besides, man, she really likes you. It was her idea for us to work together."

"I may not be that helpful. I've never written a screenplay before."

"Fuck it. Neither have I. But I've got some screenwriting books you can read, if you want to see how it works."

"I thought you had to go to film school to become a screenwriter, or at least sell your soul to Mike Ovitz. Can you really just learn it from books?"

"I already have an agent and three six-figure screenplay deals, so how fucking hard can it be?" James asks me. "I mean, *yo*, Sylvester Stallone wrote *Rocky* all by himself and he doesn't even look like he'd know how to use a typewriter."

"Maybe he dictated it," I speculate.

“Yeah, I’ve been wondering if Rina took his dick-tation, after her weird comment last night about fucking Sly and his brother, Frank.”

“I think that was supposed to be an analogy.”

“Was it? Because I know for a fact that she blew Axl Rose.”

Here we go again... I think, remembering James accusing Francesca of blowing every guy who passed by the flower stand.

“Are you sure about that?” I ask him.

“She told me herself. It happened before I met her, backstage at a Guns N’ Roses concert.”

I’m a little hesitant, but I decide to ask: “Is that what you guys’ve been fighting about?”

“No! Don’t worry... I’m not jealous anymore. Didn’t you see how cool I was with Billy Zalupa last night?”

“But Billy’s gay, she said.”

“Scientists aren’t supposed to be gay,” James informs me. “It’s against their religion. If Billy’s gay, then so is John Travolta.”

“He’s a really good dancer,” I point out.

“John Travolta’s not gay,” James says, as if the topic isn’t even worthy of his consideration. “Neither is Tom Cruise. Have you seen the chick he’s been dating? Nicole Kidman? God, she’s hot!”

“Hotter than me?” Rina asks, entering the kitchen wearing a gossamer white negligée through which I can see... well, everything. She glides past the kitchen counter like an angel – an angel with erect nipples, a Brazilian wax job, and a really nice tush.

Using his soulful Barry White voice, James intones: "No one's hotter than you, baby."

"Hey, Crash." Rina gives me a nod of acknowledgement as she opens the refrigerator and takes out a quart of orange juice. "Did James ask if you could stay with us for a while?"

"We were just talking about that."

"It'd be fun, don't you think? You could have your own tower and we'd have ours. We never use that other one."

"I don't want to invade your privacy."

"Don't worry... it's a huge house. We'll all have plenty of privacy," Rina assures me. "If you'll just help James focus on his writing, we'll take care of everything else - like food and booze."

"Sounds great," I say.

"By the way, if you start to get horny, I know plenty of actresses I could hook you up with."

"I think he's horny already," James observes.

Rina glances down at her barely-covered breasts. "He's already taken pictures of me naked, James. I think Crash can handle seeing me in a nightie."

"Whatever you say, babe." James yawns, demonstrating his new, jealousy-free lifestyle. "But when he starts humping your leg, don't act all surprised. Okay?"



Later that same morning, while Rina and James are away on errands, I make a phone call to Lloyd.

"I found Jimmy," I tell him. "He and Rina bought a house in Topanga Canyon. They have a new phone number. That's

why you couldn't get a hold of them."

"What a relief! Thank you, Gordon. How are they doing?"

"They're fine. I just spent the night with them."

"Do you mind if I ask how you tracked them down?"

"It was weird. I just started driving south, and I ended up getting lost on the way to Malibu, but then I found James' car while I was cruising around Pacific Palisades, where I met Dan Aykroyd, who got me in to Steve Martin's birthday party, and then there they were, hanging out in Martin Short's back yard with all the other rich and famous movie people."

"So James has gone Hollywood on us. I was afraid that might happen."

"He seems really happy."

"He'll be less happy when he loses his Flavor-of-the-Month status. He has his work cut out for him if he wants to thrive in that milieu."

"Rina seems to be showing him the ropes."

"Yes... about Rina... I've been reading through her medical files in-depth and I've found something that troubles me."

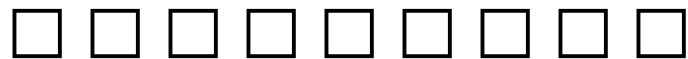
"Yeah? What's that?"

"It seems our minxy little Manchurian Candidate murdered a journalist by slipping him a bottle of radioactive nasal spray while she was on location in Russia for the filming of *Stalin Says*. I've tracked down all the relevant documents. He was a Moscow correspondent for the *Guardian* - not exactly a high-profile target. For the longest time, I couldn't understand why anyone would have wanted him dead. But then I found out he'd been the primary

culprit behind a smear campaign designed to derail the political career of Boris Yeltsin. And when I added that up with the last assignment that Rina was being groomed for, it all started to make sense.”

“What was her last assignment?”

“She was supposed to assassinate Mikhail Gorbachev.”



As Lloyd explains it, Boris Yeltsin has deep ties to corrupt intelligence agency officials and Slavic Mafia bosses that want to loot Russia of its natural resources and bleed its economy dry. But they need the cover of a sham democracy and its attendant crony capitalism to privatize the USSR’s state-controlled industries and divert the resulting profits into offshore tax havens (where those ill-gotten gains will be joined by misappropriated loans from the IMF and embezzled funds from the Central Bank of the Russian Federation). Yeltsin is prepared to lead his people into that free-market sucker trap once Gorbachev is out of the way. When Yeltsin becomes the *de facto* leader of his country, his extended “Family” will become oligarchic kleptocrats. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Russian citizens will see little or no improvement in their own standard of living, because they’ll be paying back the sums that have been siphoned off from their economy and otherwise fraudulently obtained.

“Communism or capitalism, it doesn’t matter a whit,” says Lloyd, “so long as the Dark Brotherhood’s archontic puppeteers are pulling the strings.”

“But I thought the CIA was behind Project MONARCH,” I say. “Why would *they* want to help Yeltsin by having Rina

assassinate Gorbachev?"

"You might recall that I said Yeltsin had ties to corrupt intelligence agency officials," Lloyd reminds me, "but I didn't specify that they were all KGB."

"Oh."

"Evil has no respect for national boundaries, but it will exploit nationalism wherever it can."

"So there are some Americans who'll be getting rich off this scheme, too."

"And some Germans, and some Israelis... and certainly some Saudi Arabian and Chinese businessmen, as well."

"Well, that sucks. I thought the end of Communism was supposed to be a good thing."

"It will be - for the transnational shadow elite. For the rest of us, it's just one system of exploitation being replaced by another. But the spy-riddled monopoly press won't report it that way, of course."

"They'll say it's the end of the Cold War. *Whoo-hoo!*"

"It's all happening just as Wernher von Braun predicted it would back in the mid-seventies," says Lloyd. "While he was working with Carol Rosin at Fairchild Industries, von Braun told her that the American military-industrial-intelligence complex was committed to the idea of perpetual warfare - with the ultimate goal being military dominion over the entire globe by placing weapons systems in geosynchronous orbit around the Earth. Von Braun predicted that the Cold War with the Soviets would be used to justify space-based weaponry - as we've seen with Ronald Reagan's 'Star Wars' program. But later, he said, Russia would recede as a threat and 'terrorists' would take center stage, justifying further expenditures. After that, an argument would be made that

we need to weaponize space to protect the Earth from asteroids. And then, he predicted, the ultimate trump card would be played: we would be told that we need orbiting weapons systems with cutting-edge technology to protect ourselves from extraterrestrial invaders. Aliens. But it's all a pack of lies, according to von Braun. He even went so far as to claim that aliens really *do* exist in the universes –

"Universes?" I interrupt. "Like, there's more than one?"

"Yes, von Braun always insisted on the plural – *universes*. He may have been an early fan of the Many-Worlds Interpretation in quantum mechanics."

"Or maybe he somehow knew, to paraphrase Paul Éluard, that 'There's another universe, but it's in this one.'"

"Von Braun certainly gave Carol Rosin the impression that he was privy to many of the long-held secrets in our fundamentally mysterious world. He told her repeatedly that none of the aliens were hostile. We would be taught to fear and even hate them, he anticipated, but he knew they meant us no harm."

"Do you really believe that?" I ask Lloyd.

"Believe what?"

"That no aliens are hostile?"

"Frankly, no," Lloyd answers candidly. "But I'm open to the possibility. Aristotle said that the mature mind is characterized by the ability to entertain ideas without blindly accepting them. People possessed by ideologies – fanatical true believers – are the people who often end up doing this world the most harm by trying to pass along their psychic contagions. We all might be better off if we could exercise more of Keats' Negative Capability: '*...when a man*

is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

“So hostile aliens are a big Maybe.”

“In my mind, yes. But in von Braun’s mind, no... the aliens are benign, not a threat to us at all. Nor are the Soviets, nor the soon to be trumped-up terrorists – aside from those whom we’ve antagonized to such an extent that they’re rightfully angry with us. In von Braun’s opinion, the only thing we truly have reason to fear is – ”

“Fear itself?”

“– our own government... with its entrenched, Strangelovian military-industrial-intelligence complex that thrives on continuous warfare. With each new war, the old weapons are used up and new ones are tested, while enormous military budgets are pushed through Congress for the next round of weapons. You’ll be seeing that policy in action again quite soon, now that our CIA asset in Iraq, Saddam Hussein, has decided to invade Kuwait.”

“That happened just a few weeks ago.”

“Yes, but just watch... Bush will use the Iraqi invasion as a pretext to declare war in the Persian Gulf. I can virtually guarantee it. Carol Rosin told me the plan had been decided upon over a dozen years ago, when Wernher von Braun was still alive.”

“When did he die?”

“In 1977.”

“So you’re saying Saddam Hussein did exactly what the CIA wanted him to? Invading Kuwait wasn’t even his idea?”

“Saddam started out as Chief of the Iraqi Intelligence Service. What I’m saying is that he now functions as a

convenient puppet dictator whose strings can be pulled from Langley.”

“He sounds like the Iraqi equivalent of George H. W. Bush.”

“Yes, but unlike Bush, he’ll probably hang for his crimes someday – either when his own people discover what he’s been up to, or when the CIA decides it’s time for him to be replaced.”

“Sometimes I think you give the CIA way too much credit, Lloyd.”

“You’re probably right,” he admits. “Often, when I refer to the CIA, I’m thinking of all the government spy-agencies *in toto* – the NSA, NRO, DIA, ONI, FBI, CGI and so on.”

“I’ve never heard of that last one. What’s CGI? Computer-Generated Imagery?”

“Coast Guard Intelligence – a very underrated agency. I have a lot of friends there. They were the ones who saved your life when you went over the cliff in my Bentley.”

“Tell them I said ‘Thanks’ next time you see ‘em.”

“I will. Like most military intelligence agents, they regard the CIA as a bunch of bunglers. So I really *should* break my habit of using ‘CIA’ as a blanket term. It’s a form of verbal laziness, I suppose. But the Director of Central Intelligence oversees and coordinates all the various intelligence activities among the other agencies, so there’s some justification for my verbal shorthand, just so you know.”

“I understand that,” I say. “What I meant, when I said you give the CIA too much credit, is that I have a hard time believing the CIA could totally control someone like Saddam Hussein, or decide exactly when and how Mikhail Gorbachev should get whacked.”

"I would never claim they have complete control," Lloyd demurs. "Not all CIA-sponsored dictators do as they're told. And assassination attempts often fail. But having said that, please do me a favor and keep an eye on Rina. Let me know if she exhibits any sudden shifts in mood - or if she impulsively books a flight to Moscow."

"Not a problem. Rina and James have already asked me to stay and help James with his screenwriting, so I'll be around for a while."

"I promise I'll take a more proactive role with your brokerage account so you'll have some money to spend while you're monitoring the situation for me down there."

"Thanks," I say. "That'll be a big help, since I'm out of work at the moment."

"My pleasure," says Lloyd. "I was truly sorry to hear that the *Cambria Insurrectionist* went out of business. Independent journalism and community activism is our last, best hope for maintaining what few liberties we have left. The First Amendment comes first for a reason."

"Otherwise it's just Big Brother running the show with shitty police state tactics, right?"

"Sadly, that's the direction our world seems to be headed in," Lloyd concurs. "By the way, Gordon, I wouldn't worry too much about Rina. The post-hypnotic triggering of her assassin alter was being accomplished with a combination of drugs and videotaped instructions sent to her by Doctor Smiley. Now that Smiley's in custody - thanks, in part, to reportage in the *Fresno Bee* - I don't foresee Rina being activated to carry out her final assignment. It wouldn't be worth the risk. If she got caught, some journalist might make the connection to Project MONARCH. So - provided

Rina doesn't get any strange packages in the mail, and assuming Gorbachev stays away from Hollywood - it's unlikely that Boris Yeltsin's political ambitions will be realized anytime soon."

"Well, that's comforting..." I say.

Comforting but dead wrong, as it turns out.

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HORNIER,
funnier, and more breathtakingly
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"Everywhere I went, I felt the
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"THE PHOTOGRAPHER AS MAGICIAN IS ACUTELY AWARE OF THE MULTIPLICITY
OF ASSOCIATIONS SUBMERGED IN THE APPEARANCE OF THE OBJECTIVE WORLD."

—ARTHUR TRESS

SHOWDOWN AT THE I'M OKAY CORRAL

The next few weeks pass pleasantly enough. First, I get acquainted with a slew of screenwriting manuals. (*If Syd Field is so fucking great, then why didn't any of his scripts get made into movies?*) I also read a lot of successfully produced screenplays, as examples. ("Network," "Marathon Man," "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," "The Manchurian Candidate," "Animal House," etc.) Then I start helping James with his screenplays. (INT. TOPANGA TIKI LOUNGE: Two clueless dickheads, CRASH and JAMES, drink Negra Modelos with Kahlúa chasers while scribbling on yellow legal pads.)

One of the screenplays, as James explains it to me, is supposed to be about a creepy videotape of a black magick ritual that makes its viewers susceptible to demonic infestation. James thinks it would be cool if we could find a spell from some non-bogus *Necronomicon* that would actually put the entire movie audience at risk for demonic infestation. "Think of all the free press we'd get!" he says.

I tell him he's on his own for that one.

In the evenings, Rina shepherds us to famous landmarks along the Sunset Strip (*Roxy-Rainbow-Whiskey*), where she introduces me to a series of lovely young actresses (*Heather-Tiffany-Chloé, Misha-Michelle-Maggie, Aubrey-Lexi-Brit*). Some of them even have lovely European accents (a big turn-on for me), but I have trouble matching names to their faces - maybe because they're all pretending to be

someone else. I end up having a fair amount of casual, condom-sheathed sex, but I don't feel good about it. Absurd as it seems, I still miss Kayleigh.

"Dude, you have to let her go," James advises me one night while we're sitting around back at the Topanga Tiki Lounge watching television. "Face it: Kayleigh's a whore. A nice whore, a whore with her own little whoring booth in Amsterdam, where whoring is legal - but still, a whore. She sucks dicks for a living, man. Not good girlfriend material."

"Actresses are so much better," Rina counsels me, "although most of them will suck dick, too, if the part's good enough."

"I assume you're speaking from experience," I say, half in jest.

"Crash, I've been fucked in the face more times than I can even count. It's part of the job!"

"She means that metaphorically," says James.

"I do not!" Rina protests. She cackles as James visibly struggles to maintain his cool.

"Well, at least you're honest about it," I say.

"Why lie? I'd gag on the herpes-scarred cock of a fat fuck producer like Don Simpson in a heartbeat, if it meant I'd get to star in one of his movies."

Is James inwardly seething? Yes, I believe that he is. But he doesn't say anything. He's apparently chosen the traumatotherapy method for dealing with his jealousy. Just as some brave souls get over their fear of heights by parachuting out of airplanes, James is getting over his sexual insecurities by having an unrepentant Hollywood starfucker as his girlfriend. It's somewhat akin to a person with hepatitis drinking a half-gallon of vodka - it might

serve to sterilize the liver and kick-start the healing process, or it might just kill you.

"How about David Lynch?" I ask Rina, just to goad her on a little.

"David's not into that. He's like Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes To Hell*... such a sweetie... but if he ever whipped it out, I wouldn't hesitate to go all Isabella Rossellini on his ass."

The amorality of Hollywood is like a Zen *koan* for me. Since the start of September, I've been sitting in *zazen* for at least an hour each day – just like I did at Esalen when I had to demonstrate my psychic abilities. (*Today's the eleventh, so I've been doing it for eleven days now.*) During those meditations, I allow my thoughts to rise up at random, knowing they'll just as quickly dissipate if I don't engage them. Most of my thoughts these days seem to have some connection to the pursuit of fame and the pornography of hubris.

This morning's meditation was typical:

Focusing on my breath: in through nostrils, out through mouth. Lighting up the seven chakras with each new inhalation. Exhaling impurities. Visualizing yin water – an ethereal blue-white light spiraling down from the multiverse into the top of my head. Tuning in to the high-pitched hum of tinnitus between my ears. Stillness. Emptiness. Then an actor's face looms up in my mind's eye: Robert Patrick. We met over drinks at the Rainbow a few nights ago. I've never seen him in anything, but next month he'll be on the set of James Cameron's new movie project, Terminator 2. He'll be playing the villain – T-1000 – an evil, shape-shifting robot from the future that goes up against Arnold Schwarzenegger. The movie is almost certain to

become a summer blockbuster. If it makes Robert Patrick famous, it could lead to roles that will make him rich. Humble, friendly, he told me couldn't believe his good luck. He grew up in the Midwest, didn't know anyone when he moved to Los Angeles. Still broke. His main concern is not to blow it. It's easy for me to be happy for him, to feel empathetic joy - one of the Buddha's Four Sublime States (the other three being loving-kindness, compassion, and equanimity).

My attention flits from Robert Patrick to Rina wiping her runny nose on Billy Zalupa's Armani suit to Lloyd telling me to keep an eye on Rina and alert him to any changes in her mood. I still haven't told Rina that I stole her medical records from Doctor Smiley. Should I? If she's in the clear now, will it do any good to tell her she used to be a mind-controlled assassin? Lloyd should be the one to tell her, if anyone. If I do it, James will think I'm trying to interfere with their relationship.

And what's up with James these days, anyway? Why do I find it so hard to dwell in the Four Sublime States when I'm around him? His egotism is out of control, granted. But I've encountered plenty of egotists in my life and I've always found it easy to like them, while knowing at the same time that they're incapable of genuinely liking me back. An egotist has friends for two reasons: to exploit them (which is why James asked me to help write his screenplays without offering to pay me), and to have them reflect back the image they have of themselves (if I told James he was anything less than a genius writer, narcissistic rage would result). In short, he wants fans, not friends. Oddly, the world seems to be conspiring with James to confirm his inflated opinion of himself.

Maybe I'm just a failed egotist – a jilted narcissist – and that's why James' self-congratulatory success stories bother me so much. We're most offended by characteristics in others that we refuse to recognize in ourselves. Or – how did Hermann Hesse put it in Demian? – “If you hate a person, you hate something in him that is part of yourself. What isn't part of ourselves doesn't disturb us.” Hate is too strong a word for how I feel about James, though. “Periodic bouts of prickly annoyance intertwined with a strong undercurrent of brotherly love” might be a better description – although that sounds like something from a local TV news weather forecast. Better to call it a wry rivalry.

If I had some worldly success stories of my own, I'd probably find James' bragging far less annoying. But I've been a total loser at the fame and fortune game so far. Without the charitable largesse from Lloyd – and to a lesser degree, from Skeeze – I might have ended up as a homeless bum right after the car crash. I've been paying my way through this corrupt and hostile world with the CIA's subtly diverted black budget funds and an American Express Gold Card backstopped by squirt porn profits. My one serious attempt at adhering to the Buddhist concept of Right Livelihood – working at the Cambria Insurrectionist – resulted in something less than a living wage.

I want to be immersed in creative work and make a lasting contribution to the betterment of humanity, but maybe I just don't have it in me. Maybe I'm just another talentless bullshitter, too socially inept to con others into taking an interest in me, yet still insisting that I'm special somehow, that I have a right to live large on a planet where roughly half the population gets by on less than two dollars

a day. What a worthless asshole I've become... but at least I'm aware of my own assholishness, unlike James. And that's karmic progress, isn't it?

Thus concluded another day's cheery meditation session.

"Ooh, ooh! Bush is giving a speech to Congress!" James shouts with sarcastic animosity as he flips through channels on the large-screen television. "Should we watch?"

"I hate that asshole!" Rina scowls, moving away from James on the couch.

For one flustered moment I think, *Wait... is she talking about me?*

"As you know, I've just returned from a very productive meeting with Soviet President Gorbachev..." President Bush speechifies as his familiar face fills the screen: eyes like raisins, thin lizard lips, the bloodless complexion of a vampire. "And I am pleased that we are working together to build a new relationship. In Helsinki, our joint statement affirmed to the world our shared resolve to counter Iraq's threat to peace. Let me quote: 'We are united in the belief that Iraq's aggression must not be tolerated. No peaceful international order is possible if larger states can devour their smaller neighbors.' Clearly, no longer can a dictator count on East-West confrontation to stymie concerted United Nations action against aggression. A new partnership of nations has begun."

"Meaning, 'We have a new excuse to bomb the shit out of the Middle East,'" I say.

"He's up to some heinous fuckery most foul, that's for damn sure," James chimes in.

"We stand today at a unique and extraordinary moment," Bush continues. "The crisis in the Persian Gulf, as grave as

it is, also offers a rare opportunity to move toward an historic period of cooperation. Out of these troubled times, our fifth objective – *a New World Order* – can emerge: a new era – freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace.”

“Wait a sec... did he just say New World Order?” I ask.

“He sure did,” says James.

“That’s conspiracy theorist shorthand for the coming one-world totalitarian government that plans to turn us all into slaves. You know that, right?”

“I didn’t know that,” says James, “but it sounds exactly like something Lloyd would say.”

“Have you talked to him lately?”

“Nope. Have you?”

“I’ve been thinking I should give him a call...” I say, noticing that Rina’s eyes are focused on the television screen with the dead, empty look of a doll. Her limbs seem to have gone stiff and her lower jaw is trembling. “Is she okay?” I ask, pointing.

“She gets that way, sometimes,” James says dismissively. “I try not to let her watch too much TV.”

“She looks catatonic.”

“She’ll snap out of it in a few minutes. Watch.”

Sure enough, Rina comes around after a few moments and looks over to find us both staring at her.

“What?” she asks. “Did I space out again?” She gets up from the couch with a graceful, balletic gesture, as if she’s become unstuck from gravity. There’s something subtly different in her voice, in the way that she moves. “Would

you guys quit staring at me?" she complains. "You're freaking me out."

"You're just so beautiful, babe," James says. "It's hard to look anywhere else."

"This is the vision I shared with President Gorbachev in Helsinki," Bush drones in the background as I think to myself: *Is this the change in mood that Lloyd warned me about? Should I call him?*

"You know what?" Rina says. "I've been thinking I should ask Billy Zalupa to fly me up the coast to see my parents tonight, like he promised."

"Right now? It's way late. Billy won't want to fly anywhere," says James.

"Anyway, won't he be pissed off when he finds out that you didn't really give birth to Jelly Roll, the Super Scientology Baby?" I ask.

"Who says I didn't?"

"Don't screw with us," says James. "There's no way you had a baby. I would've seen the stretch marks."

"I'm not saying I did. And I'm not saying I didn't. Stretch marks... fuck you, James." Rina turns on her heel and heads up the stairs.

Definitely time to call Lloyd, I think.



"We have a problem," Lloyd tells me after I explain the situation to him over the phone in James and Rina's guest tower. "Gorbachev secretly left Helsinki the other day aboard the *Capitalist Tool*, Steve Forbes' private jet. They

landed in Monterey last night so he could attend a high-level Soviet-American Exchange Program conference at the Esalen Institute this afternoon.”

“So Esalen’s ‘hot tub diplomacy’ is still bubbling along,” I observe.

“Now hotter than ever,” Lloyd confirms. “There’s been a complete press blackout about the event, for security reasons. The Soviets flew one of Gorbachev’s doubles from Helsinki back to Moscow to throw the international press off the trail. He’ll be ‘in seclusion’ for the next few days, until the real Gorbachev’s return.”

“And you think Rina’s getting Billy to fly her up the coast because she’s planning to kill Gorbachev at Esalen?”

“There’s no way to be sure, but we can’t take any chances now that she’s on the move. Were any packages delivered to the house today?”

“None that I know of. I was here all day. So was Rina.”

“What was she doing when she experienced her sudden change in attitude?”

“She was sitting on the couch with me and James watching the President’s speech on TV.”

I hear Lloyd let out an aggrieved long-distance sigh. “It’s possible that a certain phrase or keyword in the speech may have triggered Rina’s assassin alter,” he says. “If that’s the case, then she would have been hypnoprogrammed to respond only to Bush’s voice, to avoid any accidental activations.”

“So you’re saying Bush could be directly involved in Project MONARCH?” Bush’s fifth objective – *a New World Order* – seems even more ominous to me now.

"Don't leap to any conclusions," Lloyd cautions me. "That's only a remote possibility. More likely, videotaped loops of prior Presidential speeches were used during psychic driving sessions to hypnoprogram the trigger words in Rina's unconscious."

"But Bush, at the very least, would've had to know enough to say the trigger words tonight - and he used to be the Director of Central Intelligence - so you never know, right?"

"Right, we'll never know..." Lloyd agrees. "It's a project I could see Allen Dulles participating in quite eagerly, if he were still around. Remember Luis Angel Castillo?"

"The assassin in Manila who said Dulles was his daddy?"

"And who claimed he'd been hypnoprogrammed to kill Kennedy."

"But he said he never got a chance to fire his weapon."

"That may have been just a screen memory put in place to cloak his memory of the real event. But let's not get sidetracked. Do you think you can stay close to Rina tonight?"

"I can try."

"We still have three hundred miles between her and Big Sur. And there's no guarantee that Billy Zalupa will fly her there tonight. But just in case he does, I'll see to it that his plane is tagged with a GPS device before he takes off."

"What's a GPS device?" I have to ask.

"GPS stands for Global Positioning System. It's a device that will allow us to track the course of Billy Zalupa's plane by satellite."

"Who's 'we'?"

"If Rina flies north, I'll be joining my friends in Coast Guard Intelligence. They already have a *Reliance*-class cutter positioned just offshore from the Esalen Institute. Security on the ground is being handled by the Secret Service and Gorbachev's own KGB team - where I'm sure my presence won't be welcome."

"What happens if Rina gets on the plane? Should I go with her?"

"Go if you can. But whatever you do, don't get in the car with her after they've landed. Just get her license plate number and then get in touch with me right away. Tell Rina you have some business to take care of in Cambria. Rent your own car at the airport. Remember, she's a highly-trained assassin, and you're not."

"So what're you saying? A girl can kick my ass?"

"This particular girl, when activated, can kick just about anyone's ass - and she has the track record to prove it. Don't get in her way, Gordon. Leave the takedown to the professionals."



Given her history, Lloyd suspects that Rina will try to pose as a masseuse to get close enough to Gorbachev to take him out - either with a fast-acting neurotoxin delivered from a miniature syringe concealed beneath a fake fingernail or, more fancifully, with a time-released cyanide suppository delivered during an erotic prostate massage (if the President of the Soviet Union is into that sort of thing...). Lloyd has already confirmed that Gorbachev and his comrades will be enjoying Esalen's cliffside hot tubs late

into the night – with the traditional nude female masseuses in attendance, at the Soviets' insistence.

(Oh yeah... I think to myself, remembering. Few things in life are as good as getting a massage from a naked hippie chick at Esalen – although none of them took me anywhere near the sexual heights I experienced with Zhi and Mee in Amsterdam. Gorbachev should go to the OääD Institute if he really wants to get his Red rocks off.)

When Rina comes back down the stairs to announce that she'll be meeting Billy Zalupa at the Van Nuys Airport in half an hour, her traveling outfit makes me think that Lloyd's intuition is right on target. She's wearing a sort of Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils number – a pastel rainbow of sheer scarves loosely tied together in harem costume fashion, with slender gold slingback sandals that call attention to her minty-green toenail polish. She comes off like the hardcore slut version of Barbara Eden's character on that old TV sitcom "I Dream of Jeannie."

"Can I hitch a ride with you?" I ask Rina. "There's some stuff I need to take care of in Cambria. It won't take me more than a few hours. I can do it while you and Billy are visiting your parents."

"Sure, c'mon..." Rina says, heading for the door. "I'm sure Billy won't mind. How about you, James? Up for a little adventure?"

"Seeing your parents again isn't exactly an adventure," James says from the couch. "But watching you explain to Billy how you didn't *really* have L. Ron Hubbard's baby should be good. I'll come along just to see that."

So away we go.



The mercury-vapor lights seem especially bright around Billy Zalupa's private hangar at the Van Nuys Airport as we walk toward it. Billy's glossy indigo blue twin turboprop is already being prepped for flight out in front. Its rear cargo bay door is down, forming a ramp. Parked behind it is a perfectly restored Shelby AC Cobra painted the same indigo blue as the plane, with two wide white racing stripes running the length of its hood and down the back of its sloping trunk. Billy stands beside it, waving to us.

"Crash! James!" he says, jogging over to shake our hands. "I'm glad you guys could make it!"

"Spur-of-the-moment decision," James explains. He's lugging a big Louis Vuitton duffel bag that belongs to Rina, but he and I didn't have time to pack so much as a toothbrush. "Nice car, by the way," James says, elevating his chin toward the Cobra.

"Yeah, it's one of five original Dragonsnake Cobras. It was built for drag racing. But it only seats two," Billy apologizes. "If I'd known you guys were coming, I would've brought my G-Wagen."

"The Cobra's going with us?" I ask.

"I don't like having to rent cars at the airport," Billy explains. "My plane there is what's known as a cargolifter. I can put any car I want in the back and then just drive away after we land."

"Cool," says Rina. "It's a CASA CN-235, right?"

"Yeah! How'd you know?"

"I was in this straight-to-video movie about selling crack for the CIA a while ago. My character was a pilot and they

wanted her to look like she really knew her shit. So they sent me to Arizona for flight training school. I earned my pilot's license on a CASA C-212, which is what a lot of the CIA drug runners use, I guess. They told me it's the little brother to this one, the CN-235. Same basic plane, just not as stretched out, right?"

"That's right," says Billy, nodding his handsome, dopey head.

Like all the best liars, Rina hints at the truth without revealing it. She's our Madonna of the Limited Hangout. I want to say: "*The CIA trained Rina to fly cargo planes. And now they want her to fly one up the coast to Esalen so she can assassinate Mikhail Gorbachev.*" But I don't say anything like that, of course.

Sometimes the truth can sound too ridiculous to be believed.

"I can't believe you're a pilot!" Billy says - although he seems quite willing to believe just about anything that comes out of Rina's mouth. "How come you never told me?"

"You never asked. But I always thought that was one of the really cool things about you," Rina says, stroking Billy's ego, "that you fly your own plane."

"I'll let you fly it today, if you're up for it."

"I'm sure I'd be fine once we got in the air, but I'm still a little shaky with my take-offs and landings," Rina says, feigning modesty.

"Then be my co-pilot!"

"Okay. Deal!"

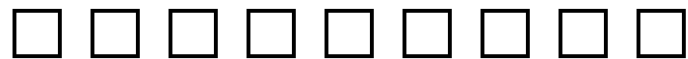
Billy turns and shouts to a tall black-haired man in a white shirt and navy blue slacks standing at the top of the plane's

cargo bay. “Mitch! You don’t need to fly with me today. Go take your wife out to dinner. It’s on me.”

Mitch smiles and gives Billy a two-fingered salute. Then he disappears into the depths of the plane as Billy hops into the Cobra and starts its big V-8 engine. With a deep, throaty burbling from the chrome sidepipes, the Cobra rolls forward on its gumball tires and climbs the ramp into the cargo bay. Mitch emerges again to help Billy secure the car in place.

I note the vanity plate mounted above the Cobra’s rear bumper: **ZALUPA1**. That should be easy enough for me to remember when I talk to Lloyd later.

I’m pretty sure it translates to **#1 DICKHEAD** in Russian. Or at least it will if Rina succeeds in her mission.



The interior of Billy Zalupa’s plane is extravagantly luxurious: burlwood paneling everywhere, black leather Eames lounge chairs with fox fur throws, a king-sized bed toward the back with a quilted mink comforter and matching mink pillows. Above the bed, the entire wall is taken up by a huge television screen, which at the moment happens to be showing the opening scenes from *Lap Dance Me Deadly*. Apparently, Billy isn’t above using his own movies as part of a sleazy seduction routine. James and I stand around looking at it, feeling slightly embarrassed for him. We’re even more nonplussed when I spy a stack of pink, green, orange, and sparkly blue hula-hoops peeking out from under the side of the bed.

“What do you think *those* are for?” I ask, speaking quietly, just to James.

"I don't know..." James answers, "but I wouldn't be surprised if he's got a Slip 'N Slide and some Frisbees under there, too. Billy's just a big kid with way too much money."

The front of the cabin is open all the way to the cockpit, turning the flight deck into a kind of theater stage, upon which the passengers can observe their hero, Billy, piloting the plane. Rina has settled into the co-pilot's chair beside him, donning Billy's oversized airline pilot's cap for bawdy effect.

"You guys should sit down and put on some seat belts," Billy says, swiveling our way in his captain's chair. "We're about to take off."

He turns back and says something into his aviation headset. The turboprop engines rev up and the plane starts to taxi along the runway. I sit down in one of the Eames chairs, surprised to find it has a discreet black seat belt. James peeks into a burlwood liquor cabinet and hoists out two cold bottles of Samuel Smith's Nut Brown Ale from a hidden refrigerator. He hands one to me as he sits down in an Eames chair across the aisle. "Here's to having rich friends!" he says, clinking bottlenecks.

"Cheers!"

"Don't crash, okay, hon?" James yells toward the cockpit.

"Eat me, Sweetie!" Rina calls back to him. "I'm a better pilot than you are!"

"That's not saying much," says James.

Billy positions the plane at the start of the runway. After getting clearance from the tower, he pushes his feet down hard on top of the rudder pedals to lock the brakes. Then he opens up the turboprops' big GE engines. In the ensuing

roar, he lets the brakes go and the plane starts hauling ass down the runway. Every bump and flick of gravel from the tires on the landing gear somehow gets telegraphed throughout the body of the plane and into us, despite our cushy seats. The turboprops chew through the night, hurtling us from a standstill to over 100 mph in less than half a minute. Then comes the stomach-floating sensation when the wheels leave the ground and the realization hits me that another huge metal machine has just taken wing – in this case, a machine that must weigh over 10 tons.

It's a moment that never fails to impress me. I'll always associate it with my father and our weekend flights in his red-and-white Cessna 172. With an internal pang that causes me to shudder, I try to imagine what it must have been like when the power lines twanged and sheared off the Cessna's wing, when my father knew the plane was going down and there was nothing he could do about it. He'd become an object with no control over its motion, like being blown off a bridge by a freak gust of wind while riding a fast motorcycle, or skiing snow-blind off a thousand-foot cliff into shrieking white nothingness. In those few seconds left to him, how did my dad react? An atheist with no thoughts of God to comfort him, feeling Nietzsche's "breath of empty space" – what was going through his head? Did time slow down for him? Did he have a suspended moment of clarity just before the Cessna's fuselage smashed through the side of our house and smeared his pulped limbs across the gold shag carpet? What was he thinking? I mean, aside from the obvious:

This is going to hurt.

Here's what I knew about him: He co-owned the family business with his much-loathed younger brother. Working

there, selling lumber and hardware, brought him little joy. He was married to a rage-prone harpy (*Hi, Mom!*) who spent his money in frivolous ways and seemed incapable of loving him. He had a sickly teenage son he couldn't relate to and another son soon to be born. His life was primarily about grim duty – trudging through a hot, dusty valley of obligations – with few pauses for pleasure or rewards. So when the wing sheared off, did he experience a sense of relief? A final freedom? Maybe he thought to himself:

I did what everyone expected of me – and now they can't expect any more.

Receding below us, Los Angeles is a net of sparkling amber jewels cast over a frozen black sea. We finally level out at around 15,000 feet. Billy tells us we can take off our seatbelts and walk around until we make our landing approach at the San Luis Obispo airport in about an hour. James unbuckles and gets two more beers for us out of the burlwood-concealed refrigerator. He also pulls out a fancy bottle of Cazadores Extra Añejo tequila and two shot glasses.

"Let's get hammered," he suggests.

I can't think of a good reason not to. I mean, aside from the fate of nations – i.e., the potential escalation of the Cold War – if Rina manages to assassinate Mikhail Gorbachev because I was too shitfaced to stop her. On the other hand, if I don't have a good buzz going, I'll probably be too anxious to do anything heroic.

It occurs to me that I should try to get Rina drunk, too. Then maybe she'll just pass out and forget about this whole assassination thing.

"Rina, come do some tequila shots with us!" I shout.

"I'm flying the plane, Crash..." Rina responds with more amusement than annoyance, "I can't have anything to drink until we land."

So much for that brilliant idea.

"The plane can fly on autopilot from here," Billy tells Rina. "Go have some fun."

"All right, Billy!" I say, raising a shot glass in his direction.

"You're the man, Zalupa!" James echoes, toasting him as Rina kisses Billy's stubbly cheek and returns the airline captain's hat to his handsome head, lending some authority to the blue-eyed doofus lurking beneath its brim.

"I can't wait to meet Jelly Roll," Billy says, all hyped up. "It's like going to meet the baby Jesus!"

"L. Ron Hubbard had some other kids," I remind him. "There's L. Ron Hubbard Junior, for instance – his firstborn – who accused his dad of being a soul-cracking antichrist vampire who cruised around on yachts with his best friend, Errol Flynn, having sex with underage girls and boys. You can read his interview in *Penthouse*, if you want."

"I never read magazines like that," says Billy, projecting his disdain. "They objectify women."

"Good for you, Billy," Rina says, getting up from the co-pilot's chair to join us in the passenger section. "I hate being objectified."

"Oh, like it matters..." scoffs James. "You and Billy are two of the most objectified people on the planet – and all it does is make your paychecks bigger."

"I'm more than just a pair of tits," Rina says with put-on hauteur. "I'm also a really good dancer." She shakes her moneymaker right in James' face, as if to prove her point.

Up on the large-screen TV at the back of the plane, Rina is starting her infamous “IllumiNaughty” striptease number on the Chippendales stage set in *Lap Dance Me Deadly*. Billy is up on the screen with her, clad in a fetching black Stetson, a black leather jock strap, and rhinestone-studded cowboy boots. They’re dancing down the ziggurat steps of twin black pyramids to the cheers from an audience of randy, overweight women. The synth punk band Berlin’s sleazy song “Sex (I’m A...)” plays at maximum volume as Rina and Billy lip-synch to the lyrics. It’s already quite the spectacle, with laser beams stabbing and pivoting through roiling clouds of dry ice smoke, but it gets even more spectacular when Rina arrives at the base of the pyramid and sets several glowing, neon-lit hula-hoops spinning about her slender torso in perfect time to the music.

So *that’s* where the hula-hoops under the bed came from. I should have made the connection earlier.

In an amazing display of coordination, the onscreen Rina begins a slow, sultry striptease as the hula-hoops keep circling her shimmying waist. Billy does a dramatic disco slide on his knees, ending up right between Rina’s supple legs, spread wide with her arms akimbo in the classic Bond Girl stance from the 007 posters. He whips off his leather jockstrap, flinging it over his shoulder into the audience. The *hausfraus* howl. There’s a brief glimpse of celebrity wood (*impressive...* and already commented upon by nearly every entertainment magazine in North America and Western Europe).

Next we see a close-up of Billy’s boggling blue eyes as he stares up Rina’s miniskirt in an iconic pussy trance. Rina rips away the skirt and her satin panties to reveal an impeccable Brazilian bikini wax with a platinum blonde

landing strip, which Billy promptly dives-bombs with his slavering tongue. The hula-hoops wobble and fall from Rina's now shuddering pelvic region, imprisoning Billy in a circular, glowing plastic cage. It's only then that we see, centered on Rina's navel, an inky black tattoo of the Eye of Providence - that talismanic Egyptian symbol hijacked by the Illuminati, originally known as the Eye of Horus. The eye winks as Rina squats over Billy's crotch and engages in some frantic (but passably R-rated) softcore showfucking.

"*Whoo-hoo!*" whoops James, demonstrating his new, jealousy-free persona once more. "Ride 'em, cowgirl!"

Just to see if I can get a rise out of him, I compliment Rina by saying: "You were doing pretty good there with those hula-hoops until Billy stuck his tongue up your snatch."

"That actually took about five hundred takes before we finally got it right," Rina explains to me just before she downs a tequila shot.

"Wait a sec - Billy went down on you over *five hundred times?*" James seems to be on the verge of losing his cool.

"I meant with the hula-hoops..." Rina clarifies. "The whole striptease sequence took over five hundred takes. I'm not really that good of a hula-hooper."

"Don't be modest, Rina," Billy says in a loud voice from the front of the plane. "You're the best hula-hooper I've ever seen. And, by the way, your pussy tasted great... like a salty mango! But I just licked her once, James, *I swear* - and I only did it 'cause they were paying me."

"Hula-hooping's how I won the Miss Atascadero contest when I was in high school," Rina explains while James fumes, "but I was a lot better at it then."

"You've still got it, baby doll," Billy insists. "I'll bet you could do that whole scene over again, right now, if you wanted to."

"But you don't have any hula-hoops."

"Look under the bed," I suggest.

"I kept those," Billy says proudly as Rina tugs the hula-hoops out from under the mink-covered bed. "They're the original hula-hoops from the movie. Someday they'll be hanging in a museum."

"Or a Planet Hollywood, more likely," mutters James.

"Aw, Billy, that's so sweet! I'm really touched," Rina says, fondling her old hula-hoops. She walks them over to the open space between the passenger section and the flight deck, then passes the hoops over her head and gives them an experimental twirl around her torso. Billy's right: she still has the right moves. The hula-hoops light up in multi-colored neon splendor as they start spinning about her waist.

"Let's back up the tape so we can hear the music again," Billy suggests, getting out of the pilot's chair.

For a brief moment I freak out, thinking the plane will crash with no one at the controls. But then I remember:

Oh right... it's on autopilot.

Billy opens an overhead burlwood panel just to Rina's left and fiddles with the controls on a high-end VCR. The images on the large-screen TV skitter in reverse until Billy pushes the PLAY button and the IllumiNaughty dance sequence starts over. Onscreen, Rina and Billy stand atop the twin pinnacles of the smoking black pyramids while the opening riff of the Berlin song resounds through the airplane interior's hidden multi-channel speakers.

The flesh-and blood Rina synchs her hula-hoops in time with the music while Billy dances over toward her from the flight deck, exhibiting the loose-limbed but supremely confident jungle cat swagger that's part of his cinematic lexicon. Few men can move like Billy. I don't know what James is thinking, but if Billy's not gay, I know I'd be worried about my girlfriend around him. Whenever I see him dancing, I feel like a schlub in comparison. Women can probably sense that in the same way that wolves can sense fear.

Rina starts her striptease. She plucks away the pastel scarves of her harem outfit one by one, tossing them into the air like laundry from a clothesline in a hurricane. Her dexterity is almost frightening in its speed and precision, as if her perception of time is slower than mine, allowing her to see and do more from moment to moment. I try to track her hands, but she moves so quickly in and out through the hula-hoops that I can barely see what she's doing. The removal of her pale blue bra is like some sort of erotic magician's trick.

I can't help it - I'm getting turned on.

Right on cue, Billy does his disco slide. His knees end up between Rina's splayed feet, with his nose hovering just inches from her crotch. But this time there's no leather jockstrap for him to rip away and toss into the audience, thank god. The shag carpeting rubbing against those wool slacks he's wearing has probably given him a monster case of static cling.

"Here comes the salty mango part..." I say to James.

"Don't cream in your jeans, Crash," he chides me. "I can tell you're really enjoying this."

I didn't think my partial erection was that obvious.

With a vixenish smile, Rina whips off her satin panties and waves them in a circle above her head, rodeo-style. Billy's tongue flops out in anticipation of some showy muff diving, but then something causes him to rear back his head. Mine rears back, too. A tampon string can be seen hanging from Rina's vagina. Actually, it's thicker and more prominent than a tampon string. More like soap-on-a-rope.

That kind of kills the erotic buzz for me.

Rina stops her shimmying. The lights on the hula-hoops wink out as they drop down around Billy's shoulders and head, enclosing him in an opaque plastic cage. Then Rina reaches between her legs and something very strange happens:

Billy starts gurgling and clutching at his throat.

As she steps out of the circle of hula-hoops, I see that Rina has a short, bloody, double-edged ceramic knife in her fist. She must have had it sheathed inside her cooch. There's a deep, gouged out hole in the middle of Billy's throat where she's carved out his Adam's apple. Billy is choking, drowning in his own blood. His fingers pinch at the hole, trying to staunch the flow, but it's no use. He sounds like he's sucking soup. With a desperate, helpless look, Billy vomits blood – spewing red chunks from the hole in his neck as well as his mouth. Then his famous blue eyes roll up in their sockets. He falls on his back in a clatter of hula-hoops, dead.

“Jesus, Rina! What did you just do?” James is out of his chair, advancing toward her. Without saying a word, Rina turns on him and slashes at his throat. James instinctively draws back as the knife tip slashes through his shirt,

grazing his sternum and drawing blood. Retreating another two steps, James finds himself pinned against the burlwood liquor cabinet. Like nude lightning, Rina closes the gap between them. There's nowhere else for him to go.

Without even thinking, I spring to my feet clutching the fox fur throw that's been draped across the arm of my chair. Time has slowed down for me, too, now. I toss the fox fur onto Rina's knife hand just as she draws back to deliver a killing blow. Then I grab the fur and pull it tight, throwing her off-balance.

With her free hand, Rina grabs a handful of James' shirt, yanking him forward. James resists, pulling against her with all his weight. In that same instant, Rina lets go of the knife inside the fox fur and reverses direction. As her slender arm pulls free, she lunges toward James, using his own body weight and momentum to push him over the liquor cabinet with incredible force. The back of James' head smacks against a burlwood panel, knocking him out cold.

I'm still dumbly holding onto the fox fur throw as Rina circles around to my left to deliver a roundhouse kick to the side of my head. I duck. Her slingback sandal only grazes my ear, but then, somehow, she ends up straddling my neck. She gets me in a scissor hold, crossing her legs at the ankles and squeezing my carotid arteries with her muscular inner thighs - a variation on the ancient Jujutsu technique known as *Hadaka Jime*, or the Naked Strangle, appropriately enough. It feels like my eyeballs are going to pop out of my skull.

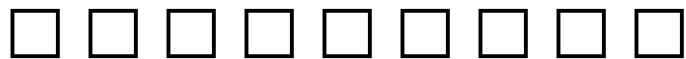
My legs give out and we go tumbling to the carpet. Somehow, my head gets turned around so that my face is buried in Rina's lethal twat. My tongue, unbidden, darts out for an exploratory probe. Could I already be succumbing

from Stockholm syndrome – trying to win over my naked ninja assailant with some friendly cunnilingus? I’m unsure of my own motives. I entered this world through a vagina and now I seem to be leaving it by the same route. My tongue wants what it wants. Why not grant its final wish?

“Cut that out, Crash, you hopeless horndog...” Rina whispers fondly without letting up on the pressure to my neck.

It’s hard to tell, but I believe she’s on the verge of a screaming orgasm. Billy was right: her plump little pussy tastes of oyster drool and tropical fruit. *A salty mango* is not a bad description. Maybe our friend Billy Zalupa had the soul of a poet.

Too bad he’s dead and I’m passing out.



“Why do my girlfriends always end up turning psycho on me?” James groans.

“Maybe it has something to do with your winning personality,” I suggest.

James is bent sideways on the airplane’s carpeted floor, trussed up with scarves from Rina’s harem outfit. His wrists and ankles are tightly bound and cinched together behind his back, forcing him to bend his knees as far back as they’ll go and arch his spine to avoid pulling his arms out of their sockets. He looks like a self-pitying long pig about to be roasted by a tribe of pygmy cannibals. As a visual gag, it might have struck me as amusing, had I not found myself in exactly the same predicament when I regained consciousness.

Billy's puke-spattered corpse lies between us with a widening pool of blood oozing around his broad shoulders. Looking up from the floor, I can see Rina in the captain's chair on the flight deck, piloting the plane – still naked, so far as I can tell. I'm not sure if she can hear us over the muffled roar of the twin turboprops, but she definitely seems to have lost interest in us. She's fiddling with the knobs on the autopilot system.

"I can't believe I let a girl do this to me," James gripes.

"Rina's not just any girl," I tell him. "She's a mind-controlled assassin."

"Don't even start with that shit, Gordon. We're in enough trouble already."

"Fine. Don't believe me. But it's true. Rina's been tortured, hypnoprogrammed, and trained as an assassin ever since she was a little girl. While I was in Kingsburg, I stole her medical records from Doctor Smiley. The records prove that he was her CIA handler. Just ask Lloyd."

"It sounds like you've been spending way too much time around Lloyd lately," James says, unbelieving.

"I left the records with him. Lloyd can show them to you the next time you're in Kingsburg. The CIA's been sending Rina to foreign countries, using film locations as her cover. While she's there, she goes into a trance and kills people they've targeted."

"She sure did a number on Billy there."

"Yeah. I wasn't expecting that one. But she already has a lot of hits to her credit. As international assassins go, she must be right up there in the Top Ten. Right now, she's on her way to Esalen to assassinate Mikhail Gorbachev."

“Gorbachev? You must *both* be in a trance. There’s no fucking way she’s killing Gorbachev.”

“Don’t be so sure, James,” Rina says from the front of the plane, without looking at us. “Everything Crash said is true. Only I’m not in a trance right now. I’m perfectly aware of what I’m doing. I’ll be killing Gorbachev because sometimes a little brute force is necessary to create a world that’s safe for democracy.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” I say, raising my voice to her. “Any ideology that insists on murdering other people is just a form of mind control propagated by evil-minded assholes who get off on human suffering.”

“Loosh-eaters,” James sums up, sort of.

I guess he’s finally coming around to my way of seeing things.

“We can’t all be bleeding-heart liberals like you,” Rina replies. “If we were, Hitler’s sons would be running this country right now.”

“It’s bad enough that Bush is in charge,” I counter. “If one of *his* sons ever gets elected President, we’re truly fucked.”

“So how are you planning to kill Gorbachev?” James asks Rina, point-blank.

“She’ll sneak into Esalen as a massage therapist and cut his throat with her concealed pussy knife, just like she did to Billy,” I say.

“Actually, I’ve programmed Billy’s Instrument Landing System to fly us straight into the cliff at Esalen where Gorbachev will be sitting in a hot tub tonight. That’ll kill everyone,” Rina says. “Just the two wing tanks full of jet fuel should be enough do the job, but to be absolutely certain I’ve also brought along a small nanothermite bomb.”

"Is that why your duffel bag was so heavy?" James asks her.

"That - and the BASE jumping suit with my escape parachute."

"You think of everything, babe," says James. "That's what I've always loved about you."

"Stop it, James. You'll make me feel bad about killing you."

"Oh, don't worry about me. It's cool... I'll just be dead. But by killing me, you'll never get to make sweet love to me again."

"You weren't that great in the sack, anyway."

Bristling, James asks her: "'Why is it that a woman always thinks that the most savage thing she can say to a man is to impugn his cocksmanhood?'"

Rina peers around from the side of the captain's chair with a look of genuine bafflement. "What does 'impugn' even mean?" she asks him.

"I'm not quite sure," admits James. "I actually stole that line from William Holden's character in 'Network' - but it felt good saying it."

"Paddy Chayefsky is the man!" I say, referring to that movie's screenwriter. James and I both read the "Network" screenplay recently, hoping to inspire our own screenwriting efforts, but it just made us realize that we could never be as good as the Great Chayefsky. "I remember that scene...."

"It was toward the end of the movie," James says, for Rina's sake, "when Holden was telling Faye Dunaway to go fuck herself - "

“- because her mind was so screwed up from working in the media industry that she didn’t know how to love anyone anymore,” I explicate.

“Sort of like you,” James tells Rina, “only with the CIA.”

Rina leaves the controls of the plane and strides over to stand above my head, facing James. “Okay, James, what do you want me to say? You were the best lover I ever had. You have the biggest, hardest cock in the whole world and it made me come so hard I thought you were Jesus. There! Does that make you feel better?”

“About dying? No.”

“Naked came the assassin...” I mutter, staring up at Rina’s clenched beaver.

“You too, Crash? *God!* I just kicked both your asses and now you’re about to die in a plane crash – and all you guys can think about is sex. What’s wrong with you two?”

“According to Freud? Nothing...” I say. “He’s the guy who linked sex with the death instinct. Blame him.”

“Thanks, Freud,” says James. “Also, being dominated by naked, bossy bitches gives me a big woody.”

“You’re both pathetic. You deserve to be dead.”

“Don’t be such a psychobunny,” James says to his soon to be ex-girlfriend. “You’re the one who runs around murdering people in the nude, but you get all bent out of shape when we make a few sex jokes. Lighten up, babe.”

“You’re the ones who’re bent out of shape.” Rina smirks, indicating our bound postures.

“Oh. Ha-ha...” says James, rubbing his cheek on the carpet to scratch an itch. “You’re hilarious. You should be a

stand-up comic instead of an assassin. If you untie me, I'll help you work on your routine."

"Fuck you, James." With a huff, Rina returns to the flight deck and resumes her place in the captain's chair. I can see her face reflected in the night-dark cockpit windshield. She looks pissed.

"Nice going..." I say to James. "'Always use sarcasm to piss off your captor.' You must've been boning up on the *Bruce Willis Total Fantasy Guide to Dealing With Terrorists*."

"Yeah, well, I haven't seen *you* making any genius moves to get us out of this."

But I do have a move. A plan has been formulating in the back of my mind this whole time. And, funnily enough, it just might be sex that saves us.

I've been thinking about my experience with Mee and Zhi at the Oääd Institute - how they broke down the mental barriers between my various alter personalities and restored my occluded memories. Although Rina the Assassin might be willing to sacrifice James as a pawn in her CIA handlers' geopolitical chess match, I'm pretty sure that Rina the Actress still has an emotional attachment to her boyfriend and doesn't want to see him hurt. All she needs is a little help breaking down the barriers to her own compartmentalized alters. She'll never go through with her plan to assassinate Gorbachev if I can find a way to provide her with total consciousness.

I think I know a way.

"Help me, Mister Wizard!" James cries out. When sarcasm fails him, irony has always been his fallback position.

“Shut up,” I explain to James. “I need to concentrate for a few minutes, okay?”

“Jeez, you seem tense! Are you stressed out about something?” he asks, smirking, but then he obliges me and goes silent.

Deepening my breathing, I start to concentrate on the feelings that welled up in me on the massage table with Mee and Zhi. I start to build up a virtuous cycle of psychic energy: *yin water* streaming down into my skull from the multiverse, *yang fire* blazing up from my nutsack as alchemically transduced jizz-light, or whatever... all of it mixing together and heating up into a combustible *yin-yang* mixture in the cauldron of my lower *dantian*. I keep at it for a while, going deeper and deeper into a meditation state. Once again, if Skeeze is to be believed, my testosterone is being converted into DMT, melatonin, serotonin, and oxytocin – all of it feeding directly into my pineal gland.

Blissful Living Love-Radiance of Infinite Divine Being, here I come....

All the while, I’m psychically sharing my relived experience with Rina along an invisible bridge from my mind to hers. I explain it to myself as morphic resonance – or maybe quantum entanglement created when my tongue probed her clit – but whatever it is, it seems to be working. I can see Rina wriggling in the captain’s chair and placing a nimble-fingered hand between her naked thighs.

She lets out a voluptuous, involuntary moan.

“You’re doing that remote influencing thing, aren’t you?” James whispers.

In my mind, I’m seeing a big pink birthday candle and feeling a stiff breeze.

At that precise moment, Rina's torso convulses and her arms and legs are wracked by spasms. A streaming gush of fluid hits the cockpit's windshield and spatters across the flight control panel. It looks like a tiger spraying urea to mark its territory.

Rina shrieks, gripping the arms of the pilot's chair and clamping her thighs together. More fluid bursts through the dam of her legs, splashing her face and breasts. Then, as the convulsions subside, she spreads her legs again and little fountain jets spritz the altimeter and the flight speed indicator. Finally, the flow sputters out, and she's able to turn around in her seat to look at us and say:

"What the hell just happened?"

James is cracking up. "That was so totally over the top!" he crows. "Do it again, Crash!"

Frankly, I'm a feeling a bit spent at this point. I could also really use a shower and a change of boxer shorts.

"What *was* that?" Rina asks, wobbling over toward us on shaky legs, like a newborn colt. The front of her is glistening, completely drenched.

"Untie us and I'll explain everything," I say.

"Did I do that?" she asks, glancing at the scarves cinched tight around our wrists and ankles. And then, a split-second later, I can see the realization dawning in her eyes: she knows that she did. "Oh my god, you guys... I'm so sorry."

"There's a knife over there somewhere in that fox fur throw," I tell her. "You can use it to cut us free. But hurry. I don't know how much time we have."

"You should've seen the look on your face," James laughs. "You were like: *Omigod! Why is my pussy exploding?*"

"I might've I had an orgasm," Rina says somewhat shyly as she goes to fetch the knife.

"Y'think?"

"Okay. I *know* I had an orgasm. A big one. But why?" Rina asks, coming back with the knife and squatting over James to cut him free.

"Ask Crash," James says, rubbing his wrists to get the circulation flowing again. "He's the one who did it to you."

"Actually, you did it to yourself," I say as Rina comes over to free me, too. "I was tied up, in case you didn't notice."

"But you had something to do with it..." she says, bending over to whisper into my ear: "*you hopeless horndog.*"

Total consciousness, for Rina, appears to include total recall – much to my chagrin.

I decide to change the subject: "You need to override the autopilot so we don't crash into a cliff in Big Sur," I tell her.

"Right! Good idea! Let's do that."

The three of us head to the flight deck. Rina sits down in the captain's chair and twiddles with the knobs on the autopilot system. She frowns. "When the knobs are pulled out, I'm supposed to be able to control our heading, airspeed, and altitude," she explains. "When the knobs are pushed in, the pre-programmed flight computer has control. But look..." she points to the unwavering numbers on the autopilot's display, "nothing's happening when I pull out the knobs and twist."

"Maybe you shorted it out," suggests James. "I mean, you just pissed all over the dashboard of this thing."

"It wasn't piss!" Rina shrills, elbowing James.

"It wasn't," I concur. "If you can believe Skeeze, it was juice from her female prostate, or *Skene's glands*."

"Well, it sure looked like piss to me," says James, unconvinced.

Rina grabs the plane's yoke and presses the red button at the top of the left handle with her thumb. Tentatively, she steers to the left and then to the right. Nothing happens. "Shit! The autopilot override isn't working, either."

"What's that mean?" James asks her.

"It means someone else is flying us by wire. They won't let me change our heading."

"Are you sure?" James asks her.

"I know how to fly this plane, James!" Rina snaps at him, letting frustration get the better of her. "I spent half a year of my life out in the fucking Arizona desert racking up flight hours."

"Can planes like this really be flown by remote control?" I ask her.

"Sure. DARPA developed the technology and the CIA has access to it," Rina says through gritted teeth, still trying to get the autopilot screen to change. "They were testing it out at Pinal Airpark while I was there. They just would've needed a little time to install it before we took off. Either that, or they put a bug in the autopilot software that locked us out after I input the settings for our crash at Esalen."

I flash on Lloyd telling me he'd make sure that someone put a GPS device on Billy's plane before we left the Van Nuys Airport. Did he double-cross us?

No, I can't believe Lloyd would do that. He's on our side.

"Did one of your CIA handlers tell you to hijack Billy's plane?" I ask Rina, trying to put the pieces together.

Her eyes look up at the fluid-streaked cockpit windshield as she checks her memory. "Yeah," she nods. "They've been prepping me for this fucking assignment for months."

"Those scheming bastards!" snarls James.

"God, I feel so bad about what I did to Billy," Rina laments. "I mean, he was just a dumb movie star, but still."

"I guess they wanted him to take the rap for killing Gorbachev," I say, feeling everything clicking into place like a jigsaw puzzle.

"Yeah, they were going to blame it on the Scientologists. That way, they wouldn't start World War Three. If a crazy cult starts killing people, then it's not like the U.S. government had anything to do with it in particular."

"Even though they did."

"Yeah, even though they did..." Rina acknowledges. "Or at least the CIA did - but some of those guys are so off in their own little spy worlds that I don't think you can even say they work for the government anymore."

"What a fucked up situation," says James. "It's like *Spy vs. Spy* in *Mad* magazine, with everyone else on the planet caught in-between."

"They have way too much power these days, that's for sure," says Rina as we hear the turboprop engines cycling down to thrum in a new, lower RPM range. "Shit!" she says. "They're already making the descent for our final approach. We have to get out of here!"

"How?" James asks her. "It's not like we have wings."

"No," Rina says, "but we have parachutes." She opens a hidden panel just behind the co-pilot's seat, revealing a stack of orange lifejackets and packed parachutes. She hands a lifejacket to James. "Put this on first," she says. "We'll have to bail out over the Pacific. The water's around fifty-eight degrees this time of year, but it'll feel colder. Your body's water entry shock response might paralyze you on impact. If you're not wearing this, you could drown."

"Great..." I say. "What about sharks?"

"You'll probably die of acute hypothermia before a shark can chew your skinny ass," Rina says, as if I'm supposed to find that reassuring. "Although I know some Great Whites are cruising around out there, just offshore, because of all the elephant seals." She tosses me a lifejacket. "C'mon, Crash. It's not like you have a choice. If you stay on the plane, you'll die for sure."

"How does this thing go on?" James asks her, already fooling around with a parachute harness.

Rina goes over to James and cinches the harness tight around his shoulders and torso. Then she shows him the ripcord, saying, "You'll need to pull this as soon as you're in free-fall, away from the plane. We're heading in low - under 2,000 feet - and if your chute doesn't open right away, the water will hit you like concrete when you touch down. It only takes eleven seconds to reach terminal velocity."

"What's that?" James asks.

"One hundred and twenty-two miles an hour, straight down."

I can already feel the slowing of our airspeed and hear the wing flaps being raised by remote control. "What's this

thing over here for?" I ask Rina, pointing to a handle on the right-hand side of my own parachute harness.

She comes over to see how I've done. "That's your cut-away handle," she tells me, cinching the harness tight and giving me an encouraging pat on the cheek. "If your main chute fouls and starts spinning out of control, you can pull on that handle to cut it away. Then you deploy your reserve chute by pulling the handle on your left. But from this altitude, you probably won't have time to deploy your reserve chute. So let's just hope Billy's parachutes were packed right in the first place."

"This is sounding better all the time," I say.

Rina goes over to her Louis Vuitton duffel bag and unzips it from one end to the other. "I need to put on my wingsuit now," she says. "We should also probably dump this nanothermite bomb while we're out over the ocean. At least that way, those guys in the hot tubs might have a chance of surviving."

"Are you sure you can't just shut off the plane's engines and let it crash before we get there?" James asks her.

"I'll try before we jump," Rina says, "but I doubt it. I'm pretty sure they've taken over the cockpit and locked me out of everything." She slips into a sleek grey nylon suit with black webbing under the arms, like gigantic vampire bat wings. A small parachute backpack is incorporated into the body of the wing suit, giving her a slightly hunchbacked look.

I've become so accustomed to Rina's nudity that I almost forgot she could wear clothes. Now I remember.

"Jesus! You look like Rocky the Flying Squirrel!" James exclaims.

The Rocky resemblance becomes even more obvious when Rina tucks her platinum blonde bob up into an old-fashioned padded leather aviator's helmet and tops the look off with a pair of rubber-strapped Flying Tiger goggles.

"Help me get this door open, okay?" she says, tugging on a big red lever on the door in the side of the plane.

James goes over to lend a hand. The door swings open with a jarring thud and a howling wind fills the plane's interior. Rina scrambles back to her Louis Vuitton duffel bag and drags it over to the open doorway. With James' help, she swings it back like a baby in a blanket and then heaves it out into the night.

Bombs away....

"There! At least that's done!" Rina shouts above the wind-roar. Next, she heads to the cockpit and pulls back on the throttle. No response. She hits a few buttons, flips a few switches. Nothing.

"All locked out!" she yells, raising her arms in a shrug. "Gordon, James... you guys should jump first. I can jump from a lower altitude with this suit, closer to shore. But you guys should go now."

I approach the door. There's nothing out there but a cloudless night and an endless, moonlit ocean. It's just one step up from leaping into the void.

"You first," James says over my shoulder.

I take one last look back at my old friend... or nemesis - *I'm leaning more toward friend these days* - and then James pushes me out of the plane.



I stumble into empty air. It doesn't feel like falling. It's more like something pillowy, pressing against me. I arch my back and spread out my arms and legs, listening to the wind blowing in my ears. After the plane pulls away, there's no sensation of plummeting whatsoever. It's nothing at all like what I expected.

Almost reluctant to end my experience of free fall so soon, I pull the ripcord. I feel a gentle tug at my shoulders, hear a soft rustle of nylon as the canopy deploys above me. Then I'm suspended like a Christmas tree ornament in the starry night with the black mirror of the Pacific spread out below me. It's peaceful up there, but cold. And the water is sure to feel colder.

Looking up, I see James leaping out of the plane like a frog on a dissection table. Soon he's dangling in the dark above me, a tiny G.I. Joe doll under a billowing plastic parachute. I send him a cheery wave, but I don't know if he can see me. He doesn't wave back.

My perspective changes as I drift lower. The ocean resolves into whitecaps and kelp islands churning in the moonlight. I make out a shadowy coastline in the distance. We were closer to Esalen than I'd thought - but not close enough to make it an easy swim to shore. It occurs to me that there's a good chance I'll drown.

All at once, I hear a distant sound of fireworks and see fiery white-gold chains of light streaking up from the sea to strike at Billy's plane. Tracer rounds. They're coming from a Coast Guard gunship all lit up in front of a sea cliff that appears at least half a mile away. I look up and see a large grey bat darting away from the plane's doorway - *Rina* - and then the searchlight spray of tracer rounds hits its target and the plane's wings bloom into twin balls of flame.

Billy's plane bursts open like a piñata spilling candy and confetti, only in this case the candy consists of Eames chairs, fox fur throws, a mink bedspread, twinkling hula-hoops, aviation electronics, and Billy's bloody corpse. The flaming turboprop engines continue their forward descent, carried by their own velocity, while a smoking hunk of fire-lit sheet metal and gumball tires dumps from the back of the disintegrating plane like a turd from a giant, car-eating robot.

One less Shelby AC Cobra Dragonsnake will be on the road as of tonight.

I search the sky for Rina. There she is, diving in a low, shallow arc, going almost horizontal beneath the shower of plane wreckage. The moonlight washes her body as she rips through the night. From my vantage point, she looks like a big wet rat on a broomstick.

The last of the tracer rounds wink out just before she gets to them. Retracing their path, she dives toward the Coast Guard gunship as if she's intent on wreaking a terrible vengeance. Then, to my complete astonishment, the front of the gunship erupts into fire and havoc, as if slammed by some sort of meteorite. My guess is that it's been hit by one of the turboprop engines – or a witchy ball of lightning from the Other Side – but whatever it is, it seems to have arrived with Rina.

She goes in for a landing like an ungainly swan. Skimming across the nocturnal sea at impossible speed, Rina rears back on her wings and lets her feet dip into the water, kicking up a rooster tail of luminous salt spray. A dragster's twin chutes pop open behind her, yanking her skyward, back into the night. At that very instant, a great white shark lunges up from the depths, thrashing its entire twenty-foot

body out of the waves to capture Rina in its jaws like a plump seal. She doesn't even have time to scream before her entrails become the shark's midnight snack.

Or maybe I just imagine that last part... because it occurs two seconds before I fall from the sky into the cold Pacific - and great white sharks happen to be on my mind.



I splash down. Huge dark green tentacles of seawater reach up and drag me under. The ocean closes over my head, deeper and blacker than the night. I'm tangled in ropes, weighted down by clothes and shoes. The buoyancy of my lifejacket isn't sufficient to float me back up toward the surface.

The cold has stunned some important part of my brain, making my synapses fire slightly out of time like half-assed jazz. It takes me a few moments to recall that I'm wearing a heavy parachute harness. I blindly feel for the clasps and shrug it off. Then I kick and scoop through blackness, hoping that I'm going in the right direction: UP. My chest aches as I fight against expelling my remaining air and taking in a fatal lung-gulp underwater. It seems like I've already been submerged far longer than I've ever held my breath before.

Finally, I surface with a swing of my head and spend the next few minutes drifting on my back, hyperventilating.

The high swells and strong rip currents aren't providing me with much hope of swimming to shore, but I strike out for the sulfurous lights of the Coast Guard ship, anyway. It's the only thing I can make out when the rough sea lifts me high enough to observe my surroundings. I don't see James

anywhere. On the plus side, I don't see any shark fins, either.

Fucking Steven Spielberg... "Jaws" ruined ocean swimming for me - especially at night.

After about an hour of dogpaddling, I seem to be no closer to shore than when I started. The Coast Guard isn't exhibiting any signs that they know I need rescuing. After getting whacked by a flaming turboprop engine, they probably have enough troubles of their own.

My teeth are chattering and I'm feeling dizzy. The muscles in my neck and shoulders are locked rigid against the cold. My testicles have retreated somewhere deep inside me, where there's still a feeble warmth. It feels like the natural heat of my life force is gushing out of me through a psychic portal in my abdomen - and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

Not only have I never been this cold, I didn't even know this degree of cold was possible in California coastal waters. No wonder all the surfers wear wetsuits around here. Water whisks away body heat much faster than air and this water is *fucking freezing!*

The hallucinations kick in shortly thereafter.

Transparent mermaids swim toward me waving coral scepters. They gather around me in a circle, sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown. I've always had a notion that I would run into my deceased friends and relatives when I die, but somehow this is better. The mermaids are astoundingly beautiful and they're all topless. Their erect nipples poke out at me from between long strands of jellyfish-translucent hair. Even mermaids get cold, apparently.

The surrounding water turns choppy as a fierce wind blows down upon us. Oddly, the mermaids begin to burp. Clockwise around the circle, each mermaid opens her pretty mouth in turn and lets loose with a thunderous bullfrog belch. It's a surprisingly grotesque sound, coming from such delicate creatures. It makes them far less attractive. The uncharitable thought occurs to me that they're feeding on my Loosh and it's making them gassy. A whirlpool starts to spin me around as I try to follow from one belch to the next. The belches come faster and faster until they're one continuous throaty chorus. Then a cone of light clicks on in the sky above us.

My first thought is that it must be one of Skeeze's black triangles, coming to save me. But no... this light is white, not blue. Maybe it's the tunnel of white light that everyone talks about when they have a near-death experience. Does this signal the end for me? More than ready to discard my shivering body, I try to will my soul to float up into it.

Nothing happens.

I appeal to an indeterminate Higher Power: *How am I supposed to go toward the light and achieve nirvana, or whatever, when I can't get out of my body?* Maybe an angel or some elderly wizard-person will come along and explain it to me. The mermaids are still occupied with their rapid-fire belching. They're obviously not going to tell me anything.

I lean back my head and drift, staring straight up into the dazzling white light as I'm carried along by the whirlpool's swift current toward its dark, sucky center. If I'm not dead yet, I expect to die soon. But then, to my horror, a giant spider appears in the light's gleam - a big rubbery black monster of a spider, descending on a silvery thread.

Holy crap! I think as fear spikes through me. *Maybe my karma wasn't so great, after all.*

I might be in for a rough ride through the *Bardo*.

It's only when the spider is almost on top of me that I realize it's a U.S. Coast Guard rescue swimmer in a black frogman's gear descending on a cable from a hovering helicopter.

The belching mermaids scatter as I embrace my froggy savior and get hauled up into the light.

LLOYD'S PROGRESS

*Minutes before midnight, September 11, 1990
Just offshore from the Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California*

Lloyd stood with Commander Lawrence J. Lipinski on the foredeck of the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Alert*, anchored just offshore from the Esalen Institute in Big Sur. They were tracking the progress of Billy Zalupa's CASA CN-235 as it headed toward them, low in the night sky. They were certain it was Billy Zalupa's CASA CN-235 because it was transmitting a unique electronic signature from the GPS device that Lloyd's shady compatriots in Los Angeles had planted on the plane before its departure from the Van Nuys Airport.

"This isn't looking good," said Commander Lipinski. "We need to bring that plane down before it gets to Esalen."

The *Alert's* MK-38 25-mm chain gun – loaded with armor-piercing incendiary tracer rounds – was already tracking the plane. So was a pair of M2HB .50 caliber machine guns capable of firing over 500 rounds per minute.

Lloyd held up his Motorola MicroTAC mobile phone and tapped the unlit screen. "I've been waiting to hear from Gordon. I'm afraid he's still on the plane."

"I'm sorry your man is in harm's way," said the Commander, "but we can't let that plane get anywhere near Gorbachev. It could be rigged with bombs, for all we know."

"I suspect the plane itself is the bomb," said Lloyd, watching the CASA CN-235 shed altitude.

"All the more reason to shoot that kamikaze bitch down now."

"Rina Rowley is not some 'kamikaze bitch'..." Lloyd corrected the Commander. "She's my nephew's girlfriend and a mind-partitioned patsy created by shitbird CIA agents who collect their paychecks from U.S. taxpayers - just like you. So for the sake of decency and all things American, you might want to appear a bit less gung-ho about murdering innocent civilians in front of your crew. And let's not forget Billy Zalupa. You'll be responsible for the death of a major movie star. If you're not careful, the media will surely ream you a new asshole over that one."

The term 'insubordination' would have leapt to the Commander's mind if anyone else on the ship had said those things to him. But since it was Lloyd Marrsden reprimanding him, Commander Lipinski mildly replied: "Our MK-38 can't hit anything over fifty-five degrees above the horizon. We're running out of time."

"My trigonometry may be a little rusty, but I believe you still have a few minutes," said Lloyd. "Let's give Gordon all the time we can. If he's onboard, he still might be able to turn things around."

"What the hell can one unarmed civilian do against a CIA-trained assassin?" Commander Lipinski asked his old friend.

"Oh, I think you'd be surprised by what Gordon can do when he puts his mind to it."

Lloyd's patience was rewarded when a spotter using high-powered night vision binoculars reported that a door had opened on the side of the plane and a large duffel bag had

been tossed out of it. Even Lloyd's unaided, slightly near-sighted eyes could make out the two parachutists that followed.

"Can we open fire now?" the Commander asked him.

"There's at least one more person aboard that plane," said Lloyd, "but she may be intent on flying it to her doom. So yes, by all means: open fire."

Commander Lipinski turned and strode toward the helipad at the back of the ship while shouting to his crew through a bullhorn: "We have two jumpers in the water. I want a search-and-rescue team in the air in five. Our target has to come down *now*. LET'S LIGHT IT UP!"

The noise the guns made was deafening. Tracer rounds lit up the night like a swarm of incandescent flying fish. Then a few things happened in rapid succession:

The plane exploded.

A flaming turboprop engine came screaming across the sky.

Lloyd looked up and said: "Oh damn..." as the engine, tumbling, appeared above the USCGC *Alert's* foredeck like the fiery fist of God.

Lloyd died.



From the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*, September 12, 1990:

BILLY ZALUPA'S PLANE CRASHES

ALL ON BOARD BELIEVED DEAD

BIG SUR, Calif. – Rescue workers scoured the ocean off the Big Sur coastline this morning, hoping to find actor Billy Zalupa and actress Rina Rowley after the twin-engine plane they were flying crashed into the Pacific en route to San Francisco.

Hours after Zalupa's CASA CN-235 was reported missing, debris that the Coast Guard said belonged to the plane washed ashore here. The search continued for the two film stars, who co-starred in the hit movie, "Lap Dance Me Deadly," in addition to their many other film and television roles. Zalupa, 29, was a relatively inexperienced pilot; Rowley, 26, had also recently qualified for a pilot's license. They had dismissed Zalupa's usual co-pilot, 38-year-old former Navy pilot Mitch Moore, before departing from the Van Nuys Airport on the evening of September 11 with two other unidentified male passengers, both now presumed dead.

"Our intention is to keep searching," Coast Guard Cmdr. Lawrence Lipinski said. "We're still in our search-and-rescue phase." But he summed up the gravity of the situation by adding: "The water here tends to be very unforgiving...."

[See **Crash**, C3]



EPILOGUE

Gnothi Seauton

*IF YOU GIVE BIRTH TO THE GENIUS WITHIN YOU, IT WILL FREE YOU. IF YOU
DO NOT GIVE BIRTH TO THE GENIUS WITHIN YOU, IT WILL DESTROY YOU.*

—JESUS, THE GNOSTIC GOSPEL OF THOMAS



EPILOGUE

Lloyd found himself standing at the heavy iron doors of Hell. Or possibly they were the doors to Heaven. But Lloyd was quite aware of his own spiritual track record and he suspected the former.

He knew with absolute certainty that he was dead. He didn't expect to wake up in bed and find out he'd been dreaming. In fact, the very thought of that happening made him grin.

A large, imposing figure - rather portly and cloaked entirely in black - stood in front of the doors reading a paperback novel. The figure's face under the hooded cloak was a mercury-smooth, rounded mirror. It reminded Lloyd of a figure in an experimental film by Maya Deren that he'd seen in his youth.

"Are you Death?" Lloyd inquired.

"I am whatever you project onto me," the mirror-faced doorman answered in a Darth Vaderish basso profundo.

"So how are you enjoying the book?" Lloyd nodded at the paperback. He could make out the cover now: John le Carré's The Spy Who Came in from the Cold. "I never got around to reading that one. Always meant to. It's supposed to be one of his best."

"Meh," said the Mirror Man. "I like Ludlum better."

Meshes in the Afternoon, Lloyd suddenly remembered. That was the name of the Maya Deren film.

"Can you hold onto this for me while I get the doors open?" Mirror Man passed Lloyd the paperback. Apparently, two hands were required to open the doors of Hell.

It occurred to Lloyd that by agreeing to hold the paperback he was, in some small way, helping himself to enter Hell. But he accepted the book, anyway. Maybe this would be the good deed that finally tipped the cosmic scales in his favor, taking him from the corporate boardroom of the sinners to the collegial campus of the saints.

Even if it didn't make a difference, there was no need to be rude.

Mirror Man got the doors open, revealing a stone stairway leading down. So it was Hell then. Lloyd wasn't the least bit surprised. He handed the book back and started descending the steps. The doors slammed shut behind him, plunging him into darkness.

"Is there a light switch somewhere?" he called out.

No answer.

The sudden absence of light was almost overwhelming in its intensity. It felt like a kind of amnesia. By some process of psychic osmosis, it seemed to be absorbing his self-referential memories – all the things that made Lloyd Lloyd – especially those poisons of personhood related to his ego: his warlike pride, his petty vanities, his sulky sense of continually being wronged in a world fundamentally lacking in love.

Feeling dizzy, Lloyd reached out in the dark and groped for the wall to his left to orient himself. At his touch, the wall lit up like a movie screen. Beneath a crystalline scrim,

it showed a high-resolution, three-dimensional holographic projection of his ex-wife, Laura.

Laura appeared enraged. Lloyd remembered well the argument she was on the verge of re-enacting. It had occurred in their bedroom just before she'd filed for divorce. The words Laura spat at him then had been intended to harm. They were even more wounding now as he heard them repeated without the protection of his ego's usual defenses:

"Frigid! How dare you accuse me of being frigid? I'm sorry my body rejected you several years ago, but having sex with you had all the appeal of squatting on top of an overfed hog."

"That's a charming analogy, Laura..." came Lloyd's disembodied reply from his former self, "but I happen to know it was menopause that dried up your sex, not my few extra pounds."

"Have you looked in a mirror lately, you effete walrus... you pig-eyed tub of lard? You repulse me. Don't you know that? Still, I took pity on you. I thought I could stay with you to enjoy the life we'd built together. But I was wrong. I don't love you anymore. I don't think I ever did. So I'm moving out. I'll just take my half of our community property and then I'll be gone."

Staggered by Laura's projected vehemence, Lloyd backed up against the staircase's far wall. When his shoulder grazed the cold stone, it lit up with a life-sized holographic projection of his own outraged former self:

"Half?" his holographic projection bellowed. "Why should you get half? You didn't earn a dime of it. Just the opposite, in fact. You were a constant drain on my earnings, a weight

to be carried. You with all your inane socializing and your endless extravagances: all the cars, yachts, vacation homes – ”

“It’s not as if we’re hurting for money, buster.”

Lloyd wasn’t finished: “– your precious spa treatments and flower arrangements, your housecleaning crews and personal chefs. Am I forgetting anything? Oh yes! And your recent six-figure landscaping bill! Everything you spend my money on is frivolous. It’s akin to stealing. You’ll get half of nothing, you frigid bitch!”

“Dante, Luigi, and Raoul certainly didn’t think I was frigid,” Laura retorted. “Neither did Marco and Federico.”

Lloyd watched as his own holographic eyes boggled. “Are you telling me you fucked the entire landscaping crew?”

“Serially – and then all together,” Laura said with grim satisfaction. Then she flinched as if Lloyd had stepped forward to strike her, but of course he’d done nothing of the sort. Then, as now, he was sunk deep in his own thoughts, a sad confused cuckold envisioning his slender, elegant, but viciously mean-spirited wife contorted with pleasure during the gardeners’ strenuous, Felliniesque copulations. Each gardener muscular, swarthy, heavy-membered, coated with the grime and sweat of an honest day’s toil....

No wonder his expensive Frette sheets always smelled like mulch.

So this was Hell: stuck alone with a shrill, holographic harpy – a backstabbing, mirror-spun Lady Chatterley – for all eternity.

Lloyd continued his descent. If Satan was down there somewhere, he wanted to congratulate him. Hell was far

more ingenious than he'd anticipated.

With each step down, another humiliating scenario from his past illuminated the walls to either side of him. Lloyd found himself unable to descend another step until the new scenario had played out. His holographic self was always on the right, his histrionic detractors on the left. Business partners, spies, lawyers, politicians, whores – they all had something unflattering to say about him. It seemed he was going to revisit every person who had ever transgressed against him, as well as all those to whom he had appeared as the transgressor.

If this was immortality, then Lloyd sincerely wished to die again without an ensuing second act. More consciousness was definitely something he could do without.

During the course of what seemed like another lifetime, Lloyd grew bored and began to look more objectively at his holographic self. He'd lived so much inside his own head that he'd never seen himself quite as starkly as the holographic projections depicted him. He'd always found it easy to discern the lies that other people told themselves, but it had been almost impossible for him to recognize the deceptions he'd practiced on himself. In fact, he knew so little about himself that his own holographic projections struck him as false, even though he was certain they must be as faithful in every detail as the holographic projections of Laura and the others. Despite that knowledge, for Lloyd it was like hearing a recording of his own voice and asking himself, Do I really sound like that?

Did I really look like that? Act like that? Say those terrible things?

Yes, you did....

He was beginning to understand that other people had tried to improve the quality of his life by acting as mirrors for him. Seeing him more clearly than he could see himself, they had criticized his moral failings and praised his acts of love and generosity. Those perspectives, often startling to Lloyd, had helped him to become a better person.

Or they would have helped him, had he paid them the slightest amount of attention.

Finally, Lloyd arrived at an arched stone corridor. It reminded him of the catacombs to be found beneath the ancient cathedrals of Europe, full of the moldering old bones of formerly proud and sanctimonious cardinals and bishops. There was a dim light at the other end, seemingly miles away.

When Lloyd stepped into the corridor, glad to be on level ground again, the corridor's walls lit up with all the holographic projections he'd just seen, plus a multitude of new ones. Then the walls disappeared. There was no more crystal scrim. Instead, he seemed to be within the crystal. He intuitively understood that the holographic projections, now utterly true-to-life, were "aspects of a holomovement-encoded crystal growing out of an information fluid suspended in five-dimensional space."

Lloyd had no idea how that phrase had arrived in his mind, but there it was... and as a descriptor for what he saw happening around him, it wasn't half-bad. Somehow, every significant moment of his life was being replayed within the crystal, all at once:

There he was with his attorneys and corporate spies, in a near-infinity of meetings, plotting the financial ruin of those who had crossed him - including Laura. Lloyd realized, in an instant, that his mighty insurance empire had been built

on a foundation of spite. Like a lion slumming among hyenas, Lloyd went in and did the metaphorical killing, then left the asset-stripped carcass to be picked over by lawyers. No wonder the U.S. government saw him as the perfect black-ops bagman. His Machiavellian business credo in those days had been: "Fuck the ethics... will I make any money?"

But then he saw the turning point in his dismal attorney-to-spiritual-satisfaction ratio: the moment when, as a neophyte suburban shaman, he'd first vomited a bellyful of ayahuasca into his Tang Dynasty vase and then hallucinated his avaricious ass off. There had been many more shamanic vomitings to follow, but Lloyd wasn't interested in those just yet. His attention was drawn, instead, to his twisted origins, to his much younger self - the child of a remote, hard-to-please father and an alcoholic mother with an acid tongue.

There he was at the age of eight, a sneaky little shitbird cheating at marbles with his guileless third grade pals. Even then, he could see his nascent talent for dissembling and exploiting naïveté in others. His whole life should have been dedicated to rising above those selfish traits and the insufferable smugness that attended them. But instead, he'd used them to become rich.

As Lloyd moved along the corridor, his perspective blurred and shifted. He found he could lightly inhabit the consciousness of anyone within the crystal and watch the scene from their viewpoint, thus becoming aware of their thoughts, emotions, and hidden agendas. The first time this happened, it was accidental. He was trying to get a better look at Laura, early in their marriage, while she made love to him in the Lazy Monk position. He must have stumbled,

or in some way moved too close, because in an instant he passed right up through her lovely bum and discovered that he was Laura, while at the same time also remaining himself.

His own prick felt exquisite.

It was true, Laura thought he was looking a bit porcine. But deep within her consciousness she genuinely seemed to love him. Or at least she had a subconscious reservoir of fondness for him. It had a lot to do with his money and his sense of humor – in truth, it was mostly his money – but for Lloyd, that was good enough. He didn't have to go through the rest of eternity thinking he'd never been loved.

By following the currents in the information fluid, he found that Laura had lied about screwing the entire landscaping crew. It had only been Luigi, and only once. New to adultery and terrified of Lloyd coming home early, Luigi had prematurely ejaculated.

Lloyd inhabited Luigi during his twenty seconds of adulterous bliss and immediately regretted the experience. Even while Luigi bucked like an incontinent stallion, in the back of his mind he was thinking of Lloyd as a loathsome predatory king – a potential tyrant of the common people. There was something almost medieval in that line of reasoning, but from within Luigi's consciousness, Lloyd could see his point.

The more Lloyd explored the viewpoints of those who had borne witness to his life, the more he realized how distorted their perceptions of him had been. Those mirrors they'd held up to him had been as wavery and warped as the reflections in a funhouse. Fear and greed distorted everything. People lied to him because they feared his judgment or his wrath; they flattered him because they

wanted something from him. No one really trusted him. And why should they have? Lloyd had proven, over and over, that he would take advantage of almost anyone.

Those insights weren't exactly new to Lloyd. What was new was the near-limitless empathy and compassion he now felt for every human being he'd ever met.

Even for Luigi, that mulch-stinking homewrecker....

Approaching omniscience, other peoples' lifetimes became the lessons of a few minutes for Lloyd. He saw everyone as the child they had once been - an innocent, full of goodness, deserving nothing less than loving grace. It was shocking how often the world snatched away that innocence and deprived those young souls of the nurturing they needed to grow up into undamaged adults. Also shocking was how nakedly vulnerable they had been to physical pain and emotional upheaval. So easily harmed.

Seeing everywhere and all at once, Lloyd found out how the world had warped the minds of his perceived enemies: Arnie Anderson, raised in a series of foster homes after losing his parents to food poisoning on a cruise ship (tainted lobster); Laura, aged twelve, watching her house burn down with everything in it (a faulty furnace); Luigi, at the age of nine, molested by an uncle in an olive grove ("It's just like licking a lollipop. Try it..."). The world, as seen from that near-omniscient vantage point, was truly appalling. Jean-Paul Sartre had it right, with his book about existential nausea - but he didn't go far enough.

Suffused with feelings of great sympathy, Lloyd wanted to go back and offer his protection and encouragement to every person he'd ever known. He wanted to absolve them of their sins. But he couldn't do that. He wasn't God. He

was just a fat man in a bespoke suit. All he could do was forgive.

He'd arrived at the end of the corridor. The archway opened onto another staircase, this one leading up. When he placed his foot on the first step, Lloyd heard Gordon's voice. But he didn't see him, because he'd inhabited Gordon's consciousness without realizing it:

"I'm going to introduce you to a fat old friend of mine," he said.

Gordon/Lloyd sat in a rented Nissan Pathfinder parked under the shade of an old cherry tree just outside of Fowler, California. He was addressing his younger brother, Derek, in the passenger seat. This was the moment when Gordon decided to place his life – in the form of his stolen medical documents – in Lloyd's hands. It was an act of faith unprecedented among Lloyd's acquaintances. If Lloyd's allegiance had been to the CIA, handing over those documents could have been Gordon's last act as a free man. No one had ever risked so much solely on a hunch that Lloyd was a decent human being, capable of care and kindness.

When he thought about what Gordon had done, Lloyd was touched to the core of his very soul. From within that soul, something began to shine out that he could only describe as Love. (Soon, he would learn to call it Loosh.) It was a surge of pure affection unlike any other in his experience. Lloyd finally understood the concept of Unconditional Love – as opposed to the love he'd always associated with desire, with its ensuing complications like divorce. And he'd come to that understanding in Hell, of all places.

Maybe Hell wasn't so hellish, after all....

Ascending the steps, Lloyd realized he could follow the currents in the information fluid not only into the past, but also into the future, beyond his own meat-death. He saw Gordon and James at a future Christmas party in a parlor room overrun with boisterous rats, which contributed to the festive mood. Francesca, Kayleigh, and Skeeze were also in attendance. All five of them were raising their champagne glasses in a toast to Lloyd's honor.

"Here's to Lloyd!" James said with great vigor. "Our fairy-fucking-godfather."

"And all-around grand guy," Gordon added.

"Cheers!" said the girls.

"I wish I could've met him," Skeeze concluded on a wistful note. He'd missed his chance when Lloyd had flown to Cambria to interview him on behalf of the Collins Elite, only to learn that Skeeze had already sailed away to Colares on his yacht.

Now, however, Lloyd could know Skeeze far better than Skeeze knew himself. It would be interesting to find out why Skeeze had been deemed worthy of abduction by those well-hung reptilians and underpants-clad dog pilots flying around in their stealthy black triangle. But before he did anything like that, Lloyd inhabited the body of a young man named Yiffer who was roasting a Christmas goose in the kitchen while being observed from the tile counter by an overweight raccoon named Señor Pepe. Lloyd discovered that Gordon and James had promised to pool their funds to send young Yiffer to a culinary institute in Paris, where he would train to become a chef over the next few years. He saw that Yiffer had a rough road ahead of him, but the chef training would eventually pay off and he'd open a

successful bistro overlooking Lake Geneva in Switzerland's French-speaking Lausanne District.

Gordon and James could afford to be generous with Yiffer because the liquid assets in Lloyd's estate had passed into their brokerage accounts in the form of tax-exempt trust funds - a large one for James, and a smaller, but still significant one, for Gordon. Lloyd had no other heirs, aside from his brother, Stan, who inherited the bulk of Lloyd's real estate and his insurance company. He had no idea how his brother, the Kingsburg Chief of Police, would handle such a large fortune - but Lloyd now had the means to find out. Hopefully, Stan would do a better job of it than he had.

Lloyd had lived out his dreams of piratical success only to find that they were barren. The only true measure of worth in his life had been his worth to other people.

Off he went, climbing the steps, flitting from one life he'd influenced to another. Here was James, signing a lucrative three-book contract with William Morrow - a publishing company owned by Cambria's next-door neighbor of sorts, the Hearst Corporation. James would go on to write more than a dozen books for William Morrow that would land on the New York Times Best Seller list:

***Beowulf's Blues*, or, Did I Rip Grendel's Arm Off? Fuck Yes! But Did It Make Me Happy? Um, No, Not Exactly... (1993)**

***Vampirism Made Even Easier* (1995)**

***Archipelago of the Horndog Bling Priests* (1997)**

***A Sea Monster spurts in San Simeon*, or, New Uses for Your Weed-Whacker (1999)**

Lamb Stewed: *The Holy Rants of Pissed-off, Post-Crucified Christ, as Told By His Immortal Pal, Yiffer (2001)*

The Sea-Skanks of Honolulu, *or, I Know Why the Caged Dolphin Sings (2003)*

The Braindead Baby Savior, *or, How I Survived My Yuletide Zombie Apocalypse (2004)*

A Filthy Undertaking: *Grave Robbing for Profit and Pleasure (2006)*

Dickless Wonder: *A Love Story for the Living Dead (2007)*

Moron of Avon (2009)

Fangs for Algernon: *A Vampire Rat Tale for Unsupervised Children (2010)*

Grendel's Blues, *or, Goddam You, Beowulf, That Really Hurt! (2012)*

The list ran on and on.... Lloyd saw James spending a few years in Hawaii, getting over Rina, and then moving to San Francisco, where he bought a lovely old mansion on Nob Hill designed by the famed architect of Hearst Castle, Julia Morgan. It seemed like a pleasant enough way to pass his time on Earth. Good for him!

Gordon seemed resigned to a more curious fate. He eventually moved to rain-soaked Seattle, then onward to New York City. He became a notoriously reclusive conceptual artist and a skilled retoucher of photos, but much of his life remained occluded from Lloyd, as if it had yet to be determined. In the last scene that Lloyd was allowed to observe, Gordon stood on a subway platform

beneath Rockefeller Center. The World Trade Center's twin towers had fallen a week earlier and letters containing anthrax spores were being sent to prominent media organizations. No one seemed to know what terrorist horror would be visited upon the city next. A D-train pulled into the station, empty save for one lone, scared-looking Sikh wearing a leather bomber jacket and a pale blue turban. He was a taxi driver, not a terrorist, but no one on the platform had any way of knowing that. They all refused to get on the train with him - except for Gordon, who sat down directly across from the taxi driver with a sure smile.

As the D-train whooshed away from the platform, Lloyd's perspective seemed to be scaling back at an even greater velocity, to somewhere outside the matrix of the space-time continuum. He saw a sandcastle glittering in hyperspace and realized its holomovement-encoded crystal spires represented midtown Manhattan. It dawned on him then that billions upon billions of holomovement-encoded crystals were growing amid the capillaries of information fluid that surrounded them. Like a limitless world of sand grains, each crystal encapsulated a being's life - human or otherwise. All of them living, dying, feeding, fucking, dancing to their own peculiar music, in a universe nursery so vast that human senses couldn't even begin to comprehend its scale. Here was Bangkok, there was Bagdad, and over in this corner, Estonia. Different layers of crystals revealed different periods of history, much like the layers of geological time observed in the fossil markers of sedimentary rock layers. The Gilded Age, the Renaissance, the Han Dynasty, the Paleozoic Era... it was all there:

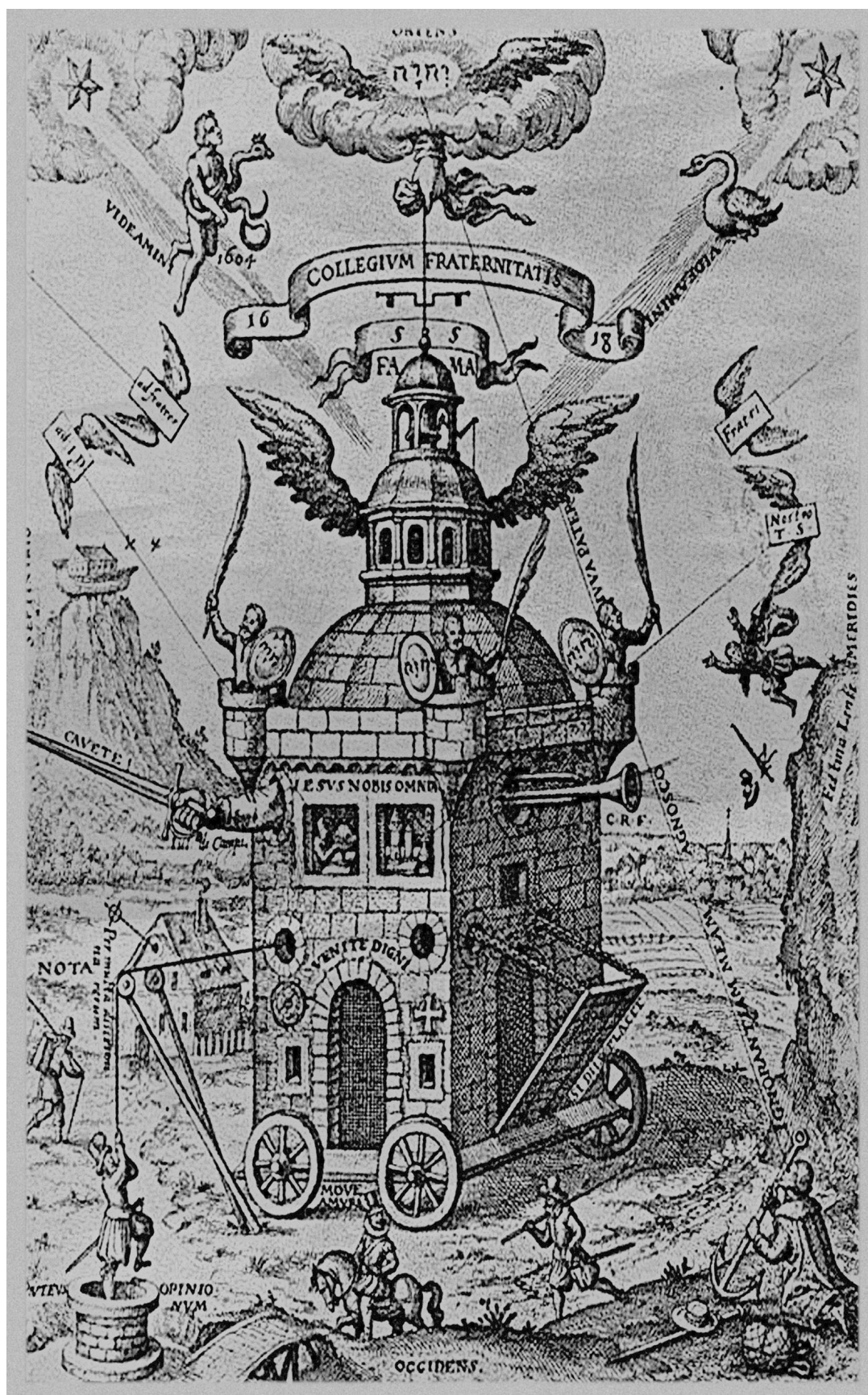
Everything that had ever been, or would ever be - all of it existing simultaneously in a timeless Eternal Now.

Lloyd was astonished to learn that he'd lived not just one life, but many. Like a spy sent into life by the forces of death (as Paul Bowles had once put it), Lloyd saw himself in a myriad of human disguises. There he was as a big-bosomed puta in late-18th-century Buenos Aires, seething with bad attitudes. There he was as a humble 12th-century Cathar fisherman in Montpellier, receiving consolamentum toward the end of his time with the Bons Hommes. Here he was as a rich, never-satisfied marquess in sooty London; here, a contented tailor in North Korea; and here, a disgruntled hipster in mid-21st-century Brooklyn, collecting aluminum cans and bottles just to survive.

Gender didn't seem to matter, nor did age, nor the level of his education. A sort of telepathic signature always told Lloyd when he was seeing one of his other incarnations. He explored those lives with gusto, relearning the lessons each had taught him. And then he journeyed back to find himself.

He'd arrived at the top of the staircase. A numinous light illuminated a tall wooden door with black iron hinges. A long tendril of jade green ivy had forced its way in through a crack and now climbed the door's planks, pointing toward a rusty key in a black iron lock. Lloyd turned the key and stepped out into birdsong and the sweet-smelling air of a mild spring day. As his eyes adjusted to the warming sunlight, he found himself surrounded by tall deciduous trees, manicured lawns, and beautiful, ivy-clad brick and stone buildings that reminded him of the Princeton campus, or the more antediluvian sites at the University of Oxford. A group of happy, healthy, intelligent-looking men and women of all ages came over to welcome him – his friends and colleagues from the Other Side.

It was a sight that filled Lloyd with gladness. After the trials of many lifetimes, it was the Invisible College made visible to him at last.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“The secret to creativity is knowing how to hide your sources,” according to the famous physicist with the unkempt hair. While I share the belief that there are no wholly original thoughts, I would also maintain that hidden connections exist between the somewhat-less-than-original thoughts of others that can be made explicit, resulting in new ways of thinking about old memes. This book, in part, is an attempt in that direction, synthesizing thoughts from many unflinching chroniclers of deep politics and high weirdness who’ve shared their findings in books and on the Internet. Those due a special note of thanks include: Robert Monroe, Kyle Griffith, Charles Fort, John Lamb Lash, Jeffrey Kripal, Whitley Strieber, John Keel, Jacques Vallee, Stan Gooch, Philip Imbrogno, Nick Redfern, Jim Houghan, John Loftus, Mary Bancroft, Deirdre Bair, Leon Davidson, Philip Coppens, Martin Cannon, Walter Bowart, John B. Alexander, Abbie and Jack Hoffman, Colin Wilson, Jonathan Zap, Rudy Rucker, Daniele Ganser, Richard Cottrell, Dan Aykroyd, and my old friend and former housemate, the uncannily funny novelist Christopher Moore. My admiration for Elvira, John Carpenter, Terry Southern, and Big Stan Kubrick will be apparent in the chapter titled “At the Movies of Madness.” I’ve also been inspired by countless documents liberated by the Freedom of Information Act – despite the U.S. government doing its bureaucratic best to nullify those disclosures and prosecute courageous whistleblowers like Daniel Ellsberg, Sibel Edmonds, Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, Michael Hastings, Barrett Brown, and Edward Snowden.

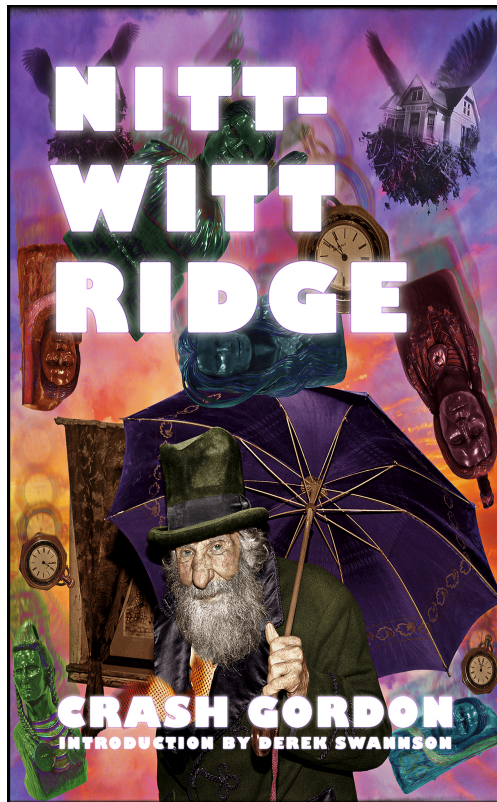
For editorial help with early drafts of the manuscript, I’m deeply grateful to Lydia Salant, Bufo Calvin, Mart Kalvet, Michael Seaver, and my lifelong friend, Mark Baehr.

ALSO BY CRASH GORDON AND DEREK SWANNSON



New York

CRASH GORDON AND DEREK SWANNSON



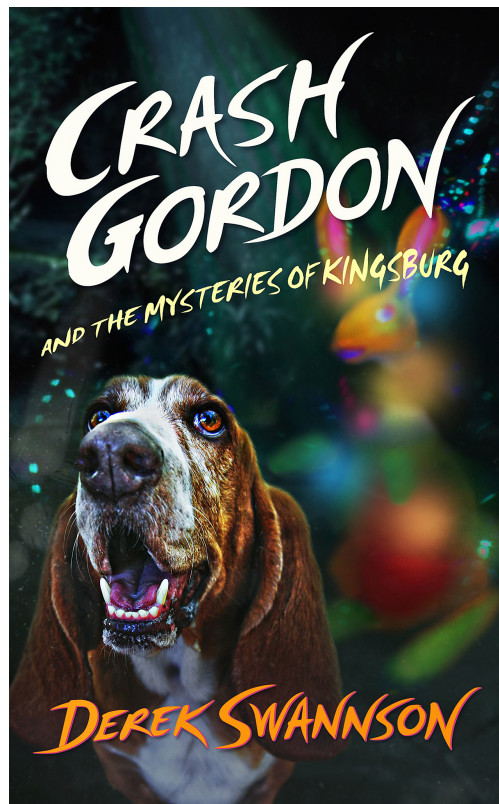
Nitt-Witt Ridge

Crash Gordon delivers this unprecedented and extraordinary Zen kōan-like novel with a voice as confident and alluring as the ancient Greek philosophers, but with much more humor.

“A HIPPIE-FREAK UNIVERSE... somewhat kinder and happier than the world we live in now (despite the occasional exploding hamster and the rampaging of a giant, vindictive, chrome robot-rooster).”

— from the Introduction by Derek Swannson, author of *Crash Gordon* and *the Illuminati Underground*

DEREK SWANNSON



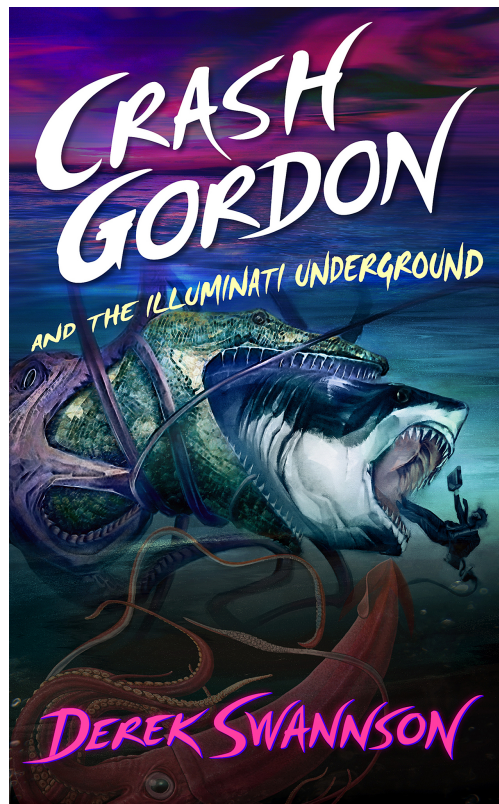
Crash Gordon and the Mysteries of Kingsburg

Daring, funny, and filled with strange facts about the medico-military-occult complex, *Crash Gordon and the Mysteries of Kingsburg* is a paranoid comedy that's seriously concerned with the fate of humanity.

"ABSOLUTELY BRILLIANT... if you like smart, literate, and humorous Conspiracy Theories about secret societies, alien manipulation, Freemasonry, narcolepsy, Templars, and the occasional psychedelic acid trip (and who doesn't?) then this book is for you!"

— *The Alternative*

DEREK SWANNSON



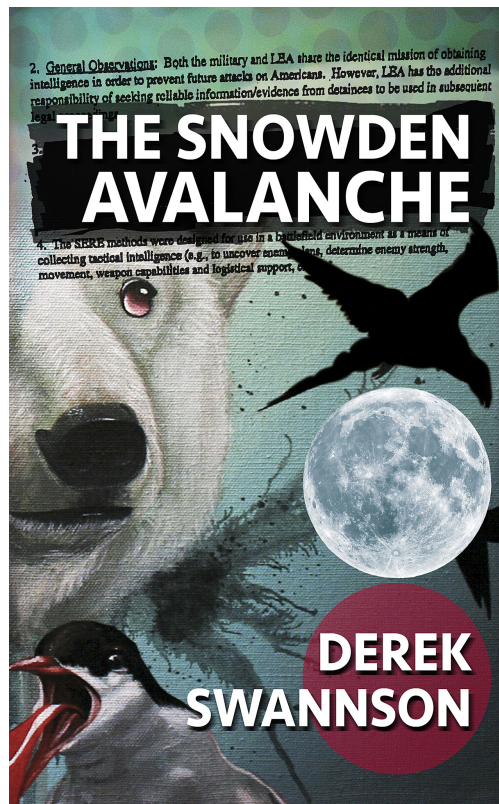
Crash Gordon and the Illuminati Underground

A parody of an increasingly totalitarian society that's already on the verge of parodying itself, *Crash Gordon and the Illuminati Underground* will forever change the way you think about the extremes of fame, wealth, and power.

"SWANNSON NAILS DOWN his claim to be the conspiracy world's Nick Cave. The latest *Crash Gordon* is a brooding, sexy, outlandishly clever and emotionally literate spin through the horrors of late capitalism and the very real rise of a punitive security state."

— Dr. Matthew Alford, author of *The Writer with No Hands*

DEREK SWANNSON



The Snowden Avalanche

In the very near future, only the rich and the devious have privacy. The Snowden Avalanche has revealed the private transgressions of ordinary US citizens in such astonishing numbers that the whole aggrieved nation seems to be coming to the collective decision that the Puritan prudery of America's first settlers finally, and forever, has to be kicked to the curb.

"SHEER JOY... a gonzo tale of insurrection, insubordination, and insolence."

— Kevin Dann, author of *Expect Great Things: The Life and Search of Henry David Thoreau*

